

Slytherin Rising Part Four: The Year of the Cat

by J. L. Matthews

Chapter One Out of the Frying Pan

The boy had been running for some time now. Not anywhere in particular - after all, he'd just burnt all his bridges with what passed for family. But he had to go somewhere, and his feet had taken him here.

Pausing for breath, he sat down on a nearby wall and pondered the events that now had him on the run. The events that, in a few short hours, had seen him go from unwanted guest at his uncle's dinner, to a fugitive from everyone or everything he'd ever held dear.

The boy was, of course, a young wizard by the name of Harry Potter, lately resident at number four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey, with his aunt and uncle, Petunia and Vernon Dursley, and third year student at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Well, ex-student now. At this very moment in time, he expected an owl to come swooping out of the sky, bearing a message informing him that he'd been expelled for practising underage magic. He'd already had one warning last summer. Now he looked to be facing the ultimate in punishment - exile from the one place he really felt he belonged. And yet, it hadn't been his fault...

It had all started when Uncle Vernon had announced that his sister Marge would be visiting for a week. Marge Dursley, who was worse than her brother where things that fell outside the scope of respectability were concerned. Surprisingly, things hadn't been too bad initially. Harry had managed to deal with the constant sniping, the suggestions as to what sort of discipline he needed next, and the blatant spoiling of his cousin Dudley. And then, on her last night, just as freedom was beckoning seductively to him, he'd blown it. Literally. Marge had insulted his parents. It had been the final straw. He could deal with the fact that Marge hated him - he'd come to expect no better. But to hear her calling his parents, Lily and James Potter, martyrs of the Voldemort War, a pair of idle, good-for-nothing layabouts, had proved too much. He'd hit her with an Inflating Charm, grabbed his things from under the stairs and legged it. And now he was alone in a Muggle street, homeless, and almost certainly exiled from all the

places he did care about. After all, that was what expulsion meant - you wouldn't be able to finish your education and become a full wizard. Had it not happened to a friend of his last year? She'd been sent home wandless, unable to practise magic, forced back into the Muggle community she'd grown up in. Except she'd been reinstated, having been proved innocent of the crime she'd been expelled for. He didn't have that excuse. Nor did he have a supportive magical family prepared to break the rules for him, as she had done. Luella Martin had had top Auror Caitlin Tyler who'd been willing to get her a new wand on the sly, and continue her magical training. The nearest thing he had was the Weasley family, but he didn't think that they'd be so willing to break the rules for him. Not that they didn't care, but that they didn't have the DDAE National Security card to play, nor did they have the Tyler bank balance to fall back on in case of trouble. With five children to feed, Molly and Arthur Weasley weren't as able to take risks as the notorious Caitlin Tyler. The notorious Caitlin Tyler who just so happened to live nearby and, on their last meeting, had openly praised his bravery with the words "Lily and James would be proud of you"...

"I am such an idiot!" muttered Harry. It had to be worth a try. If she'd been willing to help Luella, why not him? After all, her words last June indicated she had some connection with his parents. She might just be the one to understand.

He got to his feet and looked around, noticing that he'd been perched on a street sign. Magnolia Crescent. Now that sounded familiar. Flipping open his trunk, he reached inside for the brand new Wiz-o-Dex he'd received for his birthday. A present from the aforementioned Luella Martin with the details of virtually everyone he knew and a few people he didn't. It took the form of a small leather bound book with blank pages. You would write the name of the person you were looking for on the page and up would come their details. The product itself was a new thing, just launched this summer after research on a newly discovered Dark artefact had yielded the technology of so-called 'living books'. Luella's twisted sense of humour had led to her buying him one, with the inscription on the front page reading "No, don't worry, no memories of Evil Dark Wizards in here. Just everyone's address and phone numbers. So now you have no excuse not to write! Happy Birthday, mate. Love, Luella."

"You don't have anywhere to go either, eh?" Harry sighed. He found himself smiling. "Well, maybe you can come with me. I'm on the streets too. Could do with some company."

The dog responded by licking Harry's face. Harry grimaced.

"Just promise me that you'll never, ever, do that again!" He wiped the dog saliva off his cheek. Animal-lover that he was, he couldn't shake the thought of what the dog might have been licking beforehand. He shot the dog a quick glance, noting that the animal looked almost as if it were quietly sniggering at him.

And then the evening quiet was disrupted by the sound of a woman shrieking. It was coming from inside the bungalow.

"DISAPPEARED? WHAT DO YOU MEAN, HE'S DISAPPEARED??"

The dog had pricked up its ears in alarm at hearing this. It was now backing away, shooting fearful glances at the house.

The woman was still screaming at some poor unfortunate soul. Harry could see why the dog was looking worried.

"How could you let him disappear at a time like this? With Sirius Black on the loose, who knows might happen?"

Another pause. Then the woman's voice again, quieter this time so Harry couldn't catch the words. However, she still sounded highly indignant. Then came a few urgent commands directed at someone, before the sound of footsteps getting louder.

At this, the dog's composure broke. Before Harry could stop it, it had turned and was running down the street as fast as its legs could carry it.

"Wait!" Harry cried, not wanting it to go. He'd miss the animal's unforced affection. "Stay! It'll be OK!"

The dog didn't seem to hear. It just kept running away. Then Harry found his attention distracted by the sound of the bungalow's front door flying open.

He immediately leapt to his feet, wondering how he was going to explain away a broom, floating trunk and the fact that he was loitering outside this woman's house without arousing any suspicions. He fingered his wand, wondering how exactly you cast Memory Charms.

He needn't have worried. Despite the leather trousers and matching jacket, and the figure hugging black t-shirt, this was no Muggle. The woman was also wearing a black cloak and clutching a wand. This was definitely a witch. Not only that, but the very witch he'd been seeking. Caitlin Tyler, Deputy Head of the DDAE, Commander of the Aurors, and Lady Tal-y-Rhys, although that last title wasn't one she liked to admit to.

He turned away to call the dog back, wanting to reassure it that everything was OK, Caitlin wouldn't hurt it. But it was no use. The dog had vanished. Harry felt his spirit sink. He'd liked that dog. And now it was gone, and he'd probably never see it again. Reluctantly letting the dog go, he turned back to face Caitlin Tyler, who had lowered her wand, and was now staring at him as if he'd grown an extra head.

"Harry?" she whispered, her voice anxious and frightened, nothing like he would have expected the most dangerous Auror in the country to sound.

He nodded. Caitlin approached him, seeming almost timid. Harry began to wonder if she was alright. However, she asked the question first.

"Are you OK?"

He nodded again, not trusting himself to speak.

"Thank Artemis," she sighed. "Oh, Harry!" With that, she abandoned all composure and rushed forward, sweeping him into a hug. "Thank the gods you're alright, I was so worried about you!" She held him for some time, much to Harry's surprise. No doubt about it, Caitlin Tyler was in a very strange mood. Not that he minded. It wasn't often he got spontaneously hugged and fussed over. Certainly not at the Dursleys, anyway.

After what seemed like an eternity, she released him. Just as suddenly as she'd hugged him, affection turned to fury.

"Harry James Potter, what on earth do you think you're doing, wandering around the streets on your own at this time of night? Honestly, it's eleven o'clock at night, there's a very dangerous criminal on the loose, anything could have happened to you, what on earth possessed you?!"

Harry opened his mouth to explain, but he never got the chance to say a word. Caitlin had already sent his things flying into the house, and had grabbed him by the arm.

"Get inside the house this instant, young man, honestly, we've all been worried sick about you. I've had Mel on the Floo, the Ministry up in arms, what your parents would have said, I've no idea, they must be turning in their graves..."

She went on in this vein as she hustled him into the house. Harry still wasn't sure what to make of all this, but he was beginning to wonder if perhaps all was not as bad as he'd thought. Yes, Caitlin seemed annoyed, to put it mildly, and yet he didn't feel afraid of her. Guilty at causing all this trouble, yes, but not afraid. In fact, Caitlin reminded him of no one more than Mrs. Weasley berating her children for misbehaving - angry at their antics, but nevertheless still caring deep down. Harry felt his worries melting away. He needn't have doubted - Caitlin Tyler seemed certain to fight his corner. Smiling despite Caitlin's continued haranguing, he allowed himself to be ushered indoors.

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Deanna Tyler glanced up from her Potions experiment as she heard her mother re-entering the house. That hadn't taken long. She'd only gone out a few minutes ago. However, the sound of her voice echoing down the hallway told her that her mother had succeeded in her mission.

"Sitting duck... right out in the open... anything could have happened... extremely dangerous criminal out there... do you not read the newspapers?"

Deanna grinned as she tipped some willow bark into the blender and switched it on. Yes, looked like the missing Harry Potter had turned up. Sure enough, the boy in question stumbled into the room, followed by a furious Caitlin.

"So you found him then," Deanna said with a grin as she adjusted the heat setting on the oven, and started stirring in some pre-blended coffee beans.

"Oh I found him alright," said Caitlin, still seething. "In the middle of the street, all by himself, a sitting duck for anyone who wanted a shot at him. Honestly, there's less potentially dangerous situations in the What Not To Do sections of the Auror bodyguard manuals. A very good thing Sirius Black wasn't around, he'd have been dead before he knew it."

"If he was lucky," remarked Deanna. She looked Harry up and down, taking in his slightly dishevelled appearance and what passed for his best Muggle clothes. "So what were you doing out there anyway, running away from home?"

"Um... yeah," said Harry.

"Less of the smart remarks," Caitlin snapped. "I want an explanation out of you, young man, and I want it now. What on earth possessed you to go running off at this time of night?"

"They insulted my parents," Harry replied, no longer frightened in the least of Caitlin. However, he began to revise that opinion when he saw the way her eyes had gone cold as he'd said that.

"Go on," said Caitlin quietly. Too quietly. Gathering his courage, Harry explained what had happened at the dinner, and what Aunt Marge had said about his parents. Caitlin listened in silence, not reacting even when he described how he'd flung an Inflating Charm at her. Deanna snickered as he told them how Aunt Marge had blown up like an enormous balloon, bouncing off the ceiling, but one look from her mother stopped her.

Finally, Harry let his voice trail off, wondering how Caitlin would react to all this. No doubt about it, she looked angry in that deceptively non-angry way Slytherins had, when they looked outwardly calm and composed, but in reality were at their most likely to reach out and hex someone. He fervently hoped it wouldn't be him.

"I see," was all she said when he finished. Getting up, she fastened her cloak on again and reached for her wand.

"Where are you going?" asked Deanna, who'd been listening to Harry's story as if bewitched and still had that eyes-wide-as-saucers look. "Are you going to kick ass? Are you? Can we come and watch? Please?"

"No," said Caitlin calmly. "You two will stay here. Harry, you'd best stay the night, Deanna will show you the guest room. Deanna, I could be a while. You know the drill, don't answer the door, turn the lights out,"

"If the alarms go off, don't investigate, get the Floo straight to the Lovegoods, yeah, yeah, I know," Deanna sighed. "You've told me often enough this summer."

"Just making sure!" Caitlin snapped back. "I don't want to take any chances!"

"We'll be fine," Deanna told her. "Go on, you go off and do your butt-kicking thing. I'll look after Harry."

"Alright then," nodded Caitlin. "I'll be back soon. Take care." And with that, she disappeared into the night.

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Caitlin didn't waste any time. As soon as she was away from the house, she Apparated straight into the front garden of number four, Privet Drive. The door was still open where Harry had left it, and inside she could hear a boy whimpering, the piercing screams of Petunia Dursley, and the raised voice of her husband, Vernon. Caitlin fingered her wand and reached for her Auror badge. She hadn't met the Dursleys since Lily and James's wedding. This was going to be fun.

She entered the house without bothering to knock, and strode into the front room. Turned out she wasn't the first Ministry representative on the scene. In the middle of the room were two harassed-looking Obliviators in their standard black uniform which had earned them the nickname Mages In Black, or MIBs, involved in an argument with Vernon Dursley. A rather one-sided argument.

"Upsetting my wife... disrupting my home... look what he's done to my sister... evening ruined... want nothing to do with your sort!" Vernon was yelling at them.

"Mr. Dursley, we appreciate that you're upset, but really, a few simple charms and she won't remember a thing!" one of the Obliviators was saying, trying unsuccessfully to reason with him.

"No!" yelled Vernon. "No more magic in this house, thank you very much! Now you listen here, sonny, I want that wretched nephew of

mine back in this house, pronto, and I want him to put her back. Then I want you both out of this house, and if you ever come back here again..."

The first Obliviator, a mild-mannered young man who Caitlin recognised as Xander MacKinnon, a Ravenclaw who'd been three years down from her at school, was still attempting to pacify him, without success. Meanwhile, the other Obliviator, a blonde

witch not long out of Hogwarts by the name of Jackie Spinnet, was speaking into a pocket Scryscope urgently calling for back-up.

"Spinnet to HQ, situation critical. Highly unreasonable Muggles, one of whom is victim of an Inflating Charm, and Harry Potter missing, repeat, Harry Potter missing. Need senior Obliviators, and DDAE back up, over!"

Caitlin gestured and caught the girl's eye. She immediately went bright red, fumbling with her Scryscope.

"Er... never mind. DDAE back up just arrived." She turned to Caitlin. "Help!" she whispered.

Caitlin smiled at her.

"It's OK. I'll take it from here," Shaking her hair back, she switched on the Glamoury and raised her voice, brandishing her badge for all to see. "DDAE! Nobody move!"

MacKinnon stopped trying to reason with Vernon, looking immensely relieved as he realised the problem was now out of his hands. In the

corner, Petunia stopped screaming as she recognised Caitlin as a friend of her sister's, eyes narrowing in undiluted hatred. Next to her, Dudley stopped wailing, cringing as the memory of what had happened last time he'd encountered a full grown mage came flooding back. Even Marge, still floating near the ceiling, stopped spluttering in panic.

Vernon backed off from harassing the Obliviators, Caitlin presenting a rather more satisfying target.

"What do you want?" he roared at her. "You of all people should know you're not welcome here!"

Caitlin just gazed at him, not intimidated in the slightest. "Dursley. Shut. Up."

Vernon staggered back in shock, the Glamoury temporarily rendering him dumbfounded. Too much to hope that it'd last, although at least she could make use of it for now.

"Harry told me what happened here." A step forward, forcing Vernon back. "And quite a few other things as well." Another step. "Don't try to deny it, Dursley. I know what's been going on. I know how you treat him. I have seen it for myself before now. So don't try anything with me, because I am not in the best of moods."

Vernon, for once too dumbfounded to speak, stepped back again and promptly fell into a nearby chair. Petunia, however, refused to be cowed.

"Don't threaten us, Caitlin Tyler!" she screeched at her. "You always did think you were some kind of star as a child and you're no different now! Well, I'll tell you this - you're no better than any of us, despite that voodoo of yours! And if you come anywhere near my family...!"

Caitlin gazed at her in contempt.

"Believe me, Petunia, I'd like nothing better than to never have to see you or any of your family again. All the worthwhile members of it died years ago. Gods, but your parents must have been so disappointed with you." Turning away, she produced her wand and with one idle flick, undid Marge Dursley's Inflating Charm.

Even without the charm, Marge was not a small woman by any means, and as the spell undid itself, she crashed on to the floor with a mighty bang, rattling Petunia's china and the little porcelain ornamental statues of bonneted maidens and little shepherd boys that inhabited the mantelpiece. Petunia winced as a few of her beloved ornaments fell into the fireplace, shattering on impact. Caitlin considered repairing them, before realising that she really couldn't be bothered wasting magic on something so tasteless.

Gasping for breath, Marge staggered to her feet. "What happened?" she gasped, before noticing Caitlin and squinting malignantly at her. "Who are you?"

Smiling sweetly, Caitlin raised her hand and beckoned Marge towards her. Caught unawares by Glamoury in the hands of a master, Marge found herself obeying the summons despite herself, drawn towards the indignant Auror.

"My name is Caitlin Tyler," Caitlin hissed, her voice almost a whisper. "And I was a friend of Lily and James Potter. The no-account, good-for-nothing, lazy scroungers. Remember?"

"What do you want?" whispered Marge, her usual bravado gone in the face of this terrifying apparition.

"Want?" Caitlin's face changed from Ice Queen to Evil One in a second. "I want to tell you a few things. About Lily and James. Lily, former Head Girl at school. Devoted mother. Loving wife. Caring friend. Academically brilliant. Top researcher at the Ministry of Magic, at a time when we needed all the advances we could find. Callously murdered for defending her only child. That's the real Lily Evans. And James Potter. Generous to a fault. Honourable. Not a bad word for

even the worst people. Brave, courteous, former Head Boy and no less intelligent than his wife. Indeed, they worked together - that's how they ended up going out. And he too died defending his family... and mine. He was shielding my mother when he died, did you know that?" Here, Caitlin's composure cracked, as the grief for her mother that had never really ever gone away started surfacing. "She was working on something that would keep our attackers at bay, and he was standing guard, trying to buy enough time for her to finish, knowing that even if it worked, there was little chance of either of them surviving, that the best he could hope for was that Lily and I, and the children, would make it. He was one of the most unselfish people I've ever known." By now, Caitlin's voice had dropped to a whisper, and there was a tear rolling down her cheek. Irritated at her emotions being made so public, Caitlin brushed it away and sought refuge in the far less revealing sanctuary of anger. "And you have the nerve to sit there and call them scroungers!" she snarled. "You don't know what you're talking about!"

Marge was staring in uncomprehending terror. "Mad!" she whispered. "You're mad!"

"Maybe," snarled Caitlin, "but at least I'm not ignorant. I don't blame Harry for one minute - if I'd been there, I might have hexed you myself. But for future benefit," she upped the Glamour, eyes boring into Marge's. "You will not speak ill of those you know nothing about again. You will show due respect for the memory of the dead. You will stop picking on Harry Potter. You will carry my instructions in your subconscious, although you won't remember what happened here

tonight. And tomorrow, you will leave this house and not return until Harry's moved out permanently."

She fell silent, letting Marge absorb the words. Sure enough, Marge stared blankly for a few moments, before blinking and yawning.

"Goodness me, Vernon, I'm worn out. All that food and drink must be getting to me. Not getting any younger, you know!" She laughed and patted her not inconsiderable stomach. "I shall see myself to bed. Goodnight!"

"Goodnight," said Vernon weakly. Marge grinned and, walking past Caitlin as if she wasn't there, headed up the staircase to bed.

As soon as she'd gone, the two Obliviators started applauding. Caitlin grinned and bowed, secure in the knowledge that her already potent reputation had just escalated by a notch or two. This would have them talking in the MIB mess for weeks.

They were interrupted by a polite cough from the doorway. Caitlin turned and immediately stood to attention. Standing on the edge of the room were her two immediate superiors at the Ministry, Melissa Lovegood, Head of the DDAE, and Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic.

"At ease, Tyler," said Melissa, her formal manner not quite succeeding in masking a knowing twinkle in her eyes. Melissa and Caitlin had, after all, been friends for years. Caitlin smiled and relaxed.

"Thank you. Minister. Commander Lovegood." She acknowledged them both with a tilt of the head.

Fudge stepped into the room, looking about him as if he'd never been in a Muggle home before. Which, to be fair, he hadn't.

"So, er, is this it then?" he asked, taking it all in.

"It is, Minister," said Melissa, at her most deferential.

"I see. And these must be Mr. Potter's guardians." Fudge turned to address the Dursleys. "Mister, er, Doozely, is it?"

"Dursley," said Vernon stiffly. "Vernon Dursley. This is my wife Petunia, and my son Dudley." He indicated his wife and son, who nodded nervously. Despite their dislike of mages, all the Dursleys had gathered that Caitlin was someone quite high up in the

hierarchy, and if Caitlin was deferring to Fudge, then despite outward appearances, he must be even more dangerous than she was.

"Pleased to meet you," said Fudge. "I'm Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic." He extended a hand which Vernon, after some hesitation, shook, albeit gingerly. "This is the Head of the Department for Dark Arts Eradication, Melissa Lovegood, and her deputy, Caitlin Tyler. They work for the safety of our community from those who would undermine it."

"We've met," said Vernon gruffly.

"Oh. Right. Er, splendid," said Fudge, non-plussed. He decided to change tactic. "Well now, Mr. Dursley, we gather you've had a little family altercation, involving your ward Mr. Potter?"

"Too right we have, little blighter went and inflated my sister," Vernon started to say, but he was stopped by Petunia stepping forward and grabbing his arm.

"Vernon!" she hissed, before turning to Fudge and giving him a smile so insincere it should have repulsed him on the spot. However, it didn't. "Just a little family argument, Minister, nothing to worry about. Harry always has had a bit of a temper on him, and he and Marge never have seen eye to eye at the best of times. We don't invite her around much for that very reason, I mean, she does like to provoke him, especially after a few drinks. We do try and stop her, but she's a very strong willed lady and Vernon always has been a bit in awe of her."

Vernon opened his mouth to deny any such thing, but a nudge in the ribs from Petunia shut him up.

Much to Caitlin and Melissa's mutual amazement, Fudge seemed to buy it.

"Yes, yes, these things can happen in the best of families," he said delicately. "Is your sister restored yet?"

"She's fine," said Vernon stonily. "Upstairs now, sleeping it off, doesn't remember a thing."

"Excellent, excellent," said Fudge, a little nervously. He noticed the two Obliviators still watching proceedings. "In that case, you two can return to your other duties."

The two Obliviators looked at Caitlin.

"Dismissed," she told them. "We'll deal with it."

The two young mages didn't need to be told twice. Within seconds, they'd Disapparated. Fudge was now broaching the other topic that concerned them all.

"That just leaves your nephew, young Harry. Now, it's my intelligence that the boy ran out of the house after casting the spell, is that right?"

"It is," sighed Petunia. "Always doing it, the little tyke. Forever throwing temper tantrums when he doesn't get his own way." Somehow, she managed to maintain her composure despite the look Caitlin was giving her.

Fudge turned to Caitlin. "Any news of the boy yet?"

"He's safe," Caitlin replied. "Found him in my own street - he's at my house now. He looked exhausted, so I told him he could stay the night with me."

"He can stay the whole bloody summer if he likes," Vernon muttered. "No skin off my nose."

Petunia's eyes were on Caitlin as he said this, and she wasn't slow in catching the momentary look of hope in the Auror's eyes. Guessing Caitlin's weakness, she decided to exploit it to the full.

"Oh, that's so kind of you!" she exclaimed. "But we can't possibly impose on you. Of course we'll take him off your hands tomorrow morning. Get him back in the bosom of his family where he belongs."

"Petunia, what are you-?" Vernon asked, stunned at what his wife was saying.

"Ssh, I know what I'm doing!" she hissed. All smiles again, she turned back to Fudge. "We're so sorry to have put you to so much trouble."

"That's quite alright, Mrs. Dursley," Fudge assured her. "These things happen. Of course, normally we would have left it to the Magical Reversal Squads, but in circumstances like these, we can't afford to take risks. There's a rather dangerous dark wizard on the loose at the moment, and while we don't think there's a huge risk to you in your normal activities, it's not a good time for a child to be alone outside after dark."

"Dangerous wizard?" barked Vernon. "Why were we not informed? Do you mean to tell me my family's at risk?"

It was Melissa who intervened here. "No, of course not, Mr. Dursley. This man is not overfond of Muggles, true, but we don't believe he'll want to draw attention to himself. Right now, his main targets are certain mages, and they're being watched constantly. No, I assure you, as long as you stay inside after dark, you'll be quite safe."

"But if you're that concerned, we'll have a watch placed on the street for you, just in case," Fudge offered.

"Not bloody likely!" snorted Vernon. "I'm not having the neighbours talking about all these robed weirdoes hanging around. House value'll go into freefall!"

"We've got ways of making it very discreet," Melissa promised. "No one'll know they're there."

"Still not happy about it," Vernon muttered.

Melissa shot a look at Caitlin, and suddenly smiled. She too had seen the look on Caitlin's face earlier and knew what it meant - Caitlin was Harry's godmother, and he'd been meant to stay with her all along. However, after his parents had died, Caitlin had had a minor nervous breakdown and been incapable of caring for anyone, let alone two demanding toddlers. Albus Dumbledore's intervention had prevented Deanna from being taken into care, but he'd not done the same for Harry, deciding that he would be better off growing up in the Muggle world with the Dursleys, away from the fame that would follow him everywhere in the magical one. But that didn't mean Caitlin, once recovered, had ever given up hope of one day getting him back. Melissa, of course, knew all this better than anyone. And her ever creative mind was coming up with the workings of a plan.

"What if I could provide a way of dispensing with the need for a guard altogether?" she purred.

"Could you?" asked Vernon hopefully.

"Oh yes," Melissa nodded. "You see, this man's main targets are those who helped to arrest him in the first place all those years ago. That's why he's escaped, to get revenge. At the moment, the only people in danger are those on his hit list... and of course, anyone who gets in his way."

"I see." Vernon exchanged a worried look with Petunia, who was no longer looking quite so sure she wanted Harry back. "And, er, who might be on this hit list?"

"Well, Mr. Dursley, I'm very much afraid that young Harry's parents were among them," sighed Melissa. "And Harry himself, although only a baby, managed to deflect an extremely powerful curse on to the chief dark wizard at the time. This, of course, brought our escapee's career to an abrupt end and was instrumental in leading to his arrest. Mr. Dursley, I'm very much afraid that Harry is top of the hit list. That's why we were so worried when he disappeared." Melissa stood back, successfully concealing a grin as this news sank in.

"Melissa, is this really wise, worrying them like this?" Fudge demanded.

"Essential, Minister," Melissa replied, deadpan as ever. "They need to know the truth. How do you think it would look for us if they continued in blissful ignorance, and Black took advantage and killed them all? The scandal could cost us all our jobs."

This had the immediate effect of bringing Fudge round to her way of thinking.

"Gosh, yes, quite, quite. Do what you think best, Melissa."

The Dursleys had reacted exactly as Melissa had hoped. Petunia had flung her arms around her son in panic.

"You mean this maniac could be coming here?" she screeched. "Intent on hurting my family?"

"Black?" Vernon demanded. "Hang on, not that lunatic that was on the news? And he could be on his way here right now?"

"The very same," Melissa told him. "We thought it best that the Muggle populace was warned of the danger. He's killed before, twelve with one curse."

"Twelve?" whispered Petunia, looking as if she was about to faint. "At a time?"

Melissa nodded. "He's very dangerous. However, there is one avenue of hope."

"What? What? We'll do anything!" cried Petunia.

"Well," purred Melissa, "the point is, he's only after Harry. That's who he wants revenge on. You, on the other hand, are simply a normal Muggle family and of no interest to him at all."

Petunia was not slow in grasping her meaning. "Take him," she said hoarsely. "You can have the boy. I don't want him putting my family in danger."

"Too right, nothing but trouble since the day he came to live here," said Vernon. "Take him and welcome. He causes enough problems as it is, and now you say there's a mass murderer after him? Well, he's not bringing him here. Good riddance, is what I say."

"Of course, Mr. Dursley," said Melissa, bowing. "We shall make alternative arrangements for his welfare and send him to a safe house until it's time for him to return to school. Once at school, he'll be safe enough. He'll have to remain there over the Christmas and Easter holidays, but that should be enough. We hope to have apprehended Black by then, but we'll review the situation anyway next summer, see if you want him back and if it's safe enough. How's that sound?"

Vernon and Petunia looked at each other. On the one hand, they were loath to let Harry go somewhere he might actually enjoy himself, and Petunia in particular had wanted to spite Caitlin. On the other hand, the threat of a mass murderer turning up at their house had a way of putting things into perspective.

"Fantastic idea."

"Couldn't agree with you more."

"Excellent," Melissa smiled, her plan having succeeded to perfection. "Minister?"

"Hmm? Oh. Yes. Of course." Fudge hastily tried to assert some semblance of authority. "Yes, it sounds excellent. Of course, security is more your department than mine."

"Thank you, Minister," Melissa nodded. "All that remains now is for us to choose a safe house for Harry to go to." Here, she looked rather pointedly at Caitlin, who was not slow in taking her cue.

"Please, Minister," she began, "seeing as Harry's already at my house, I was wondering... I mean, would it be possible..." She took a deep breath and went for it. "Could he possibly stay with me?"

"With you?" Fudge stared in surprise. "What on earth for?"

"Yes, Minister," Caitlin breathed, trying not to sound too desperate. "I mean, he could be after me too, so there's no added danger to me by having Harry there. And I've already got one teenager to look after, another one shouldn't be any trouble. There's plenty of room too, and the house is one of the most fortified in the country. Come on, Minister, what do you say? Please?" She flashed him the smile she reserved for persuading attractive young wizards to carry her bags and open doors for her, underwritten with a generous dose of Glamoury. While it didn't have quite the same all-conquering result it had with younger wizards, it wasn't without success. Fudge didn't seem to know quite what had hit him.

"Oh, er, well, not quite sure, could be security implications, er..." He turned to his security advisor. "Melissa, what do you think?"

"I think it's a very good idea," Melissa replied, successfully keeping a straight face. "Caitlin's house is even safer than mine."

"And mine, of course," said Fudge.

"Of course," Melissa coughed, ignoring the raised eyebrow from Caitlin, who knew full well the exact state of security around all three residences, and where Fudge's house stood in relation to the Tyler house and Lovegood Farm.

"Very well then," Fudge nodded. "If Melissa's satisfied then so am I. Harry can stay with you, Caitlin, until term starts again."

Caitlin resisted the urge to punch the air.

"Thank you, Minister," she said, all the while grinning at the scowl on Petunia's face.

"Well, if that's all arranged, we'd better get a move on," said Fudge.

"Does Harry need to pick up anything from here?"

"No, I think he's got everything," said Caitlin. "I can always buy him anything he's forgotten."

"Excellent, excellent. In that case, I think we can leave these good people to their own devices. Good night, Mr. Dursley." Fudge bowed to Vernon, who just glared at him, before Disapparating.

Caitlin and Melissa looked at each other, before turning back to the furious Dursleys, grins of triumph all over their faces.

"We'd wish you goodnight," Melissa began.

"But quite frankly," Caitlin continued, "we don't care. Come on, Mel."

"With you all the way, Cait."

Linking arms, the two women promptly Disapparated.

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They re-appeared on the pavement outside Caitlin's house. Caitlin turned to her friend, smiled and pulled her into a hug.

"Thank you," she whispered, choking with happiness. "Thank you so much! You have no idea how much this means to me."

"Don't mention it, Cait," Melissa smiled, returning the hug. "I know you hated seeing him go to them in the first place, it was the least I could do. Anyway, you saw the look on Petunia's face."

Caitlin couldn't help cackling at this. "Revenge," she laughed, "is sweet. She always was a bitch. Did you know that's how Lily and I met? She was running away from her sister at the time, and I used Glamoury to hide us both."

"Yes, you've told me a thousand times, you and Lily both," Melissa sighed. "But all the same, it's nice to get one over her."

Caitlin giggled, before smiling at her friend. "Thanks, Mel. You know, if there's ever anything I can do for you..."

"You'd have probably done it anyway, because we're mates," Melissa interrupted. "Don't mention it."

Caitlin embraced her again. "Mel Lovegood, you are a wonderful, amazing, beautiful woman and I love you to bits. Thank you!"

"Hey, no problem," Melissa shrugged as she let her friend go. "Anyway, I'd better get back to work. Some of us have night shifts to get on with!"

"I'm sorry," Caitlin grinned, not sorry in the slightest. With Harry Potter in the vicinity of her house, it had been decided that Caitlin should remain at home over the holidays to keep an eye on things, unless there were some emergency at the Ministry. This meant no night shifts, about which Caitlin was not at all displeased.

"You will be," Melissa retorted. "Wait until term starts, you'll be back on nights every other day until Christmas."

"Sadist," Caitlin poked her tongue out at her.

"So are you," replied Melissa. She indicated the house. "Go on, get inside. Your kids are waiting for you."

Caitlin thanked her again and, as Melissa Disapparated, made her way indoors in a better mood than she'd been in since the news of Sirius Black's escape had first become known.

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Meanwhile, inside the Tyler house, Harry was getting some answers from Deanna. And his first question was what on earth she was making.

"Hangover cure," Deanna replied, slicing up some monkshood.

"Why, is your mum on to your drink problem?" Harry teased.

"No," snapped Deanna, scraping the leaves into a nearby saucepan. "I am researching the possibility of using Muggle cooking implements in Potions making. And this, funnily enough, was the only recipe in the house for which we had a plentiful supply of ingredients."

"Oh." Harry frowned. "Why?"

"Why? Because my mum's yet to outgrow her hellraiser tendencies." Deanna rolled her eyebrows in disapproval.

"No, I meant why are you using Muggle gear?" Harry asked.

Deanna shrugged. "It's something to do. After all, my mum's virtually banned me from leaving the house on my own since this Sirius Black guy escaped, I might as well occupy my time productively." Picking up the assorted leaves, beans, roots and berries she'd been preparing,

she tipped them all into the pan and started stirring it, before taking it off the heat, decanting it into a ceramic dish, placing a glass lid over it and putting it in the microwave for two minutes on High.

"Is that good for it?" Harry asked in alarm.

"Potion or the microwave?"

"Either."

Deanna watched it calmly. "Should be alright. Normally that potion has to simmer on an open fire overnight, but this is far quicker in my view. I've been experimenting and two minutes on High is fairly similar. Chill, Harry, I know what I'm doing!"

"I hope so," Harry sighed. "I don't want to have to explain to your mum why her microwave's exploded."

"I wouldn't worry," Deanna replied sarcastically. "She never uses it."

Harry decided to use the opportunity to get some questions answered.

"Deanna, this Sirius Black that your mum keeps going on about. Is that the same guy that was on the news?"

"That's right," Deanna nodded. "Mum said that Mr. Fudge had decided to inform the Prime Minister, just in case any Muggles got hurt."

Harry digested this information, suddenly realising that if the Minister of Magic was involved, then that meant...

"Hang on, he's a wizard?"

"Yeah," said Deanna. "One of Voldie's henchmen. Got sent down to Azkaban years ago for a mass murder. Twelve Muggles and a wizard. At the same time."

Harry shuddered. Killing one person was one thing. Killing thirteen with a single curse was something else.

"Nasty piece of work. And he's escaped?"

"Yeah," sighed Deanna. "And Mum's lost it big time. She's added extra wards and barriers to the house, invoked all the spirits of her ancestors to keep watch, banned me from leaving the house unaccompanied, sits up half the night on sentry duty, and do you know what really gets me?"

"What?" asked Harry.

"This." Deanna held up her wrist, indicating a bracelet that Harry hadn't seen her wearing before. It was a silver chain with a glowing green stone hanging from it.

"Not seen that before, is it new?" Harry asked, fingering it. "What's the stone?"

"Jade," replied Deanna. "But it's not jewellery. It's a homing tag, which reports my whereabouts to the Ministry at all times, and sets off an alarm if I'm anywhere other than this house, the Lovegoods or Diagon Alley, and Diagon Alley only during the day. Can you believe it?? My own mother has tagged me!" Deanna looked highly indignant at the thought.

Harry had known Caitlin Tyler was paranoid, but he hadn't known she was that worried.

"Is he really that dangerous?"

"He'd better be!" snapped Deanna. "Because if I find out he's really a big softie, and I'm suffering this gross invasion of privacy and my civil liberties for no reason, Mum's seriously for it!"

"She's only doing it because she cares," Harry felt bound to point out. "I mean, she's an Auror, she must have good reason for being worried. She wouldn't do it otherwise, would she?"

"No, probably not," Deanna sighed, lowering her arm. "I mean, he is dangerous. Must be. I mean, no one escapes from Azkaban, no one. It's the most heavily guarded place on the planet."

"Even more than the Minister of Magic's house?" Harry asked. Deanna grinned.

"A lot more heavily guarded." Deanna also knew how high on Melissa Lovegood's list of priorities Cornelius Fudge's house was.

"Wow. So how'd he do it then?"

"We don't know," said Deanna. "No one knows. Not even the guards know. Mum reckons they're furious. But that's not the only reason she's scared."

"What's the other one?" Harry asked, agog with fascination. It wasn't often someone like Caitlin Tyler got scared, and there had to be a very good reason.

"He was one of us," Deanna said softly. "You know... an Auror."

"An Auror!" gasped Harry. "Working for Voldemort?"

Deanna nodded. "Yeah. Bad, isn't it? He was good too, one of the best, so Mum says. She knew him quite well, so she tells me. They were good mates, apparently. That's why the whole thing's thrown her so much. She still can't believe someone she knew and trusted, someone she worked with, could do that. Reckons that right up until he was arrested, she never knew or even suspected, and that's why she's so frightened. He must be good for her not to have guessed a thing."

Harry shivered involuntarily.

"How frightened is she, really?"

"Really frightened," said Deanna quietly, the indignation and teenage bravado wearing off, revealing the worry beneath. "I've never seen her like this before. Never. She's told me quite a bit about him, but I still get the feeling there's a whole lot more she can't or won't talk about. Like there's something else he did that she won't tell me about, something that hurt her personally. I mean, I know she feels like he betrayed her anyway, but it seems to go deeper, you know?" Deanna shook her head. "I don't know, I mean I'm not going to ask her or anything, but I'm sure there's stuff she's not telling me. For example, the Lovegoods must be at risk too, Auntie Mel's head of department for Hera's sake, and yet Marls reckons she's not being grounded to anything like the same extent as me. As long as she's back by dark, and stays in crowded places, she's allowed out as normal. Auntie Mel's not exactly the most relaxed person in the world, and yet she doesn't seem as concerned about her own family. And I can't work out why."

Harry didn't get the chance to ask her any more questions. The front door opened, and minutes later, Caitlin Tyler herself walked in, smiling from ear to ear.

"Hey kids," she greeted them, seemingly back to her old self.

"Hi Mum," Deanna called as she got up to retrieve her potion. The microwave had dinged some time ago, but they'd been too engrossed in conversation to notice.

"Hello, Mrs. Tyler," said Harry.

"Please, call me Caitlin," she smiled as she slid into a chair. "Well now, I have had an eventful evening."

"What happened?" asked Deanna, eager for news as she examined her potion, and with an approving look, emptied it into a Tupperware box, wrote "Magic Alka-Seltzer" on it with a marker pen and slung it in the fridge.

"I had words," Caitlin grinned, and proceeded to tell them what had happened, right up until the point where Marge Dursley had gone to bed.

Deanna punched the air and yelled, "Go Mum!" Harry was no less cheerful, although shyness prevented him from doing anything more than grinning, and whispering "Cool!" Then his face immediately fell.

"Oh no!" he cried. "They're going to hate me!"

"Thought they already did?" said Deanna.

"Yes, but they'll be even worse now!" Harry moaned. "They'll take it out on me, I just know it!"

"Maybe," Caitlin grinned. "But they'll have nearly a year to plan it. You're not going back there until next summer, Harry."

"I'm not?" Harry blinked. This sounded too good to be true.

"No." Caitlin's grin grew even wider. "Because you're staying with me."

Harry had no idea how to react to this, however he became gradually aware that he was sitting there grinning like an idiot, while Deanna had shrieked with delight and flung her arms round him, patting him on the back and enthusing over him.

"Yes! Company!" she yelled. "Oh man, we are going to have the best summer!"

Caitlin was smiling at him tenderly, although there was a note of anxiety in her voice as she waited for a response.

"Well, Harry? What do you say?"

Harry tried to find the words, but found that a lump had appeared in his throat and they wouldn't come out.

Caitlin, misinterpreting his silence, was looking at him in concern.

"Harry? Are you alright?"

Harry managed a nod, words finally forcing themselves out.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine. I... I'd love to stay here."

Deanna, standing behind him with her arm draped over his shoulders, tightened her grip on him and ruffled his hair affectionately. While Caitlin, looking as if she was about to burst into tears, was gazing at him with a tenderness so fierce it could have frightened him. As it was though, he was so glad that he wasn't returning to the Dursleys, he didn't care.

"I'm not going back?" he whispered, feeling his own tears starting to well up.

"Not for a long time," Caitlin said softly.

"And... I'm not expelled?"

"No way!" Caitlin laughed.

Harry collapsed in his chair, sheer relief flooding through every fibre of his being.

"Brilliant," he sighed. "Just brilliant!" He turned and smiled at both Tylers. "This is going to be the best summer ever!"

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Chapter Two Geeks and Grudges

It took some time for Harry to realise where he was when he woke up the following morning. For one thing, he'd been able to wake up at his

own pace, without Petunia Dursley hammering on the door, yelling for him to get out of bed so he could get started on the chores she had waiting for him. And for another, all his things were actually in his room, as opposed to locked under the stairs.

Harry blinked and rubbed his eyes. This wasn't the Dursleys' house. And then the events of last night's came back to him, and he realised that he was at the Tyler house, and that he wouldn't be going back to Privet Drive for an awfully long time.

Grinning, he got out of bed. He could smell the tantalising aroma of toast floating upstairs, and chances were good that he'd get offered some. Pulling on his dressing gown, he wandered downstairs.

And turned around on reaching the bottom, it suddenly occurring to him that the Tylers lived in a one-storey bungalow. Some things about the magical world, he'd never get used to.

Such as the apparition that was vacuuming the living room carpet. Gilderoy, now Martha, Lockhart, hair in curlers and wearing a flowery frock with matching apron.

"Good morning, young man!" s/he cooed, looking up from hir Dyson.

"Er... morning," said Harry, not quite sure what to think. "What are you doing?"

"The cleaning," said Lockhart, rather primly. "Look at this place, an absolute disgrace. Dust everywhere, and you should see the amount of hair that's been getting caught in the roller of this thing. Not that I've anything against Ms. Tyler, but her housekeeping leaves much to be

desired. But never mind that. How are you? Harry, isn't it? Deanna told me you were staying here."

"That's right," said Harry. "Caitlin's letting me stay until school starts."

"Splendid, splendid!" Lockhart beamed. "I must say, Deanna's been bored to tears what with not being allowed out, and her friends all being on holiday. It'll be good for her to have company."

"Yes, I suppose so." Harry looked around, noticing that there was a large tartan shopping trolley in one corner packed with household cleaning equipment. "So, do you come here every day to do the cleaning?"

"Oh no," Lockhart shook his head. "Only two days a week. I also do one day a week at the Weasleys, and two at the Stormosis. And let me tell you, it does take all that time too. But all the same," and here Lockhart's face broke out into a rather maternal smile, "I wouldn't change it for the world!"

"Wouldn't you?" asked Harry.

Lockhart shook his head. "Not in the slightest!"

"Not even for a career as a brave and heroic fighter of the Dark Arts?" Harry asked slyly.

"Goodness me, no!" Lockhart gasped. "I don't think I'd like that at all. Far too dangerous."

Harry couldn't resist a smile at this. Ever since Lockhart had suffered total amnesia at the end of the last school year, his priorities and identity had undergone a dramatic change, but even Harry couldn't have foreseen just how dramatic it had actually been. Lockhart the Cleaner wasn't something he'd have seen coming.

"Where is Deanna, anyway?" he asked, looking around. There wasn't anyone else in the room.

"In the kitchen," Lockhart replied, switching the Dyson off and reaching for a pink feather duster. "Making breakfast. Why don't you join her, I'm sure she'll make you some too."

"Thanks. I'll ask her," Harry promised, leaving Lockhart to the dusting and heading for the kitchen.

Sure enough, Deanna was sitting at the table, still in her pyjamas, eating some toast with the radio on in the background, playing what Harry recognised with a surprise as Radio Two, Britain's leading station of choice for the over thirty fives, specialising in easy listening, soft rock, and anything pre-punk. The show currently broadcasting appeared to be the weekday breakfast show, Wake Up To Wogan.

Deanna glanced up and noticed him looking at the radio.

"Tell anyone I listen to this and you're dead," she warned him.

"Including your mum?" Harry asked with a grin.

"Especially my mum." Deanna indicated the toaster. "Help yourself to brekkie, by the way. Kettle's just boiled, tea, coffee and sugar are in the storage jars next to it, mugs are on the mug tree, oddly enough, milk in the fridge, bread in the bread bin, cutlery in that drawer there, bowls and plates and things in this cupboard, cornflakes in that one, and we have exciting stuff like croissants and pains au chocolat in the freezer, they just need defrosting."

"I get it made for me at the Weasleys," Harry said, looking around him.

"At the Dursleys, you wouldn't be getting anything at all," Deanna yawned. "Now stop complaining. There's food available and lots of it. Make the most of it."

She did have a point, Harry conceded. Self-service breakfast was considerably better than no breakfast at all, with the added advantage that he could help himself to as much as he liked, and eat whatever bizarre combinations he liked.

Deanna watched in mild revulsion as he immediately began helping himself to no less than five slices of bread, along with a pain au chocolat from the freezer, orange marmalade and Marmite.

"Pig," she commented. She noticed the jar of yeast extract and grimaced. "Oh gods, not you too. Mum likes that stuff. I personally think it's revolting."

"What?" Harry protested as the first slices of toast popped up from the Tylers' little toaster. "It's lovely! Look!" Hastily spreading a slice of toast with the stuff, he waved it in Deanna's face. "Try some!"

"Argh!" Deanna yelled, backing away. "Get it away from me! Horrible stuff! Yuk!" She glared at Harry, who was munching away, grinning. "Git. How you can just sit there and eat it quite happily... Ew." She got to her feet, shuddering. "Anyway, I am going to shower and get dressed, then I'm going to come back, do the washing up, and then I am going to get stuck in to my homework. You done yours yet?"

"A bit," said Harry. "The Dursleys disapprove so I have to do it at night while they're in bed."

"Wish my mum refused to let me do homework," Deanna sighed. "Still, she's got some of the best anti-Dark Arts books anywhere, if you need to look anything up. Just

don't go anywhere near the top shelves, that's where she keeps all the dangerous ones. Anyway. I shall leave you to your carbohydrate-fest." She eyed up the mounting pile of toast on his plate. "If you haven't burst owing to having overeaten, that is."

"If it hasn't killed Dudley yet, it won't kill me," Harry pointed out. He brandished the Marmite jar. "Are you sure you don't want some?"

"Perfectly," snapped Deanna through gritted teeth. Turning away, she began to realise that she'd acquired nothing less than Marlie and Rianne's biggest cause of complaint - the Annoying Sibling. Still, it could have been worse. Despite herself, she was rather fond of Harry, and it was nice to see him coming out of his shell. He'd always been quiet at school - too quiet. And yet here he was teasing the much-feared Deanna Tyler. The Dursleys hadn't managed to crush his spirit entirely then. There was hope for him yet.

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The days passed, and Harry began to get used to life at the Tylers'. It was certainly better than life at the Dursleys' - how could it not be? But it wasn't like being at the Weasleys' either. For one thing, although he had the run of the house, freedom to be a wizard and access to as much food as he liked, he still had to assist in preparing the meals. He also had to do his own laundry, something Molly Weasley would never for a minute have tolerated. However, he didn't really mind. He wasn't a bad cook, having had to cook meals for the Dursleys before now after all, and he supposed it wasn't too unreasonable to help out, especially given that Caitlin Tyler had to work.

Deanna proved to be surprisingly good company. If she was starting to see him as a newly arrived younger brother, he found himself thinking of her as the older sister he would have liked to have. While not tolerating any messing around for a second, she was more than willing to chat to him about anything he wanted to talk about, from the Muggle Top 40 to the latest rumours from the Ministry, and had proved very helpful indeed where his holiday homework was concerned. In fact, he managed to get it all done in a week, including that essay from Professor Snape which he'd deliberately wanted to leave until last. It was a very strange thing, but Potions sounded like a totally different subject when Deanna talked about it. Snape's obsessive nitpicking became measured caution and attention to detail when it was Deanna telling him about it, and the merciless sarcasm that greeted anything less than perfection was merely rolled eyes and gentle teasing from the

Slytherin youngster. He began to wonder idly if Snape had ever considered hiring Deanna as a classroom assistant.

Deanna burst out laughing when he suggested it to her.

"You what? Help teach you lot? You must be joking, I've heard about your class. What with you and Ron constantly getting into fights with Malfoy and friends, Malfoy always trying to sabotage your efforts and Hermione always showing off her knowledge and generally acting like she should be doing the teaching, it sounds like a match made in Tartarus. And don't even get me started on Neville Longbottom."

"It's not that bad!" Harry protested, not entirely convincingly. "Where did you hear all this anyway?"

"Snape of course, who else?" Deanna responded, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for Snape to be sharing his opinions with her.

"Figures," muttered Harry. He'd never get used to hearing someone talk about Professor Snape as if they liked him. From the way Deanna spoke about him, you'd have thought he was an aware, sensitive mentor, not the sarcastic sociopath he was familiar with. Still, maybe he was different to the Slytherins.

"You'd still make a good teacher though," he told Deanna. "You know your stuff, and you're good at helping people too."

"Oh, get away," said Deanna, embarrassed. "I'd be a terrible teacher. No patience whatsoever. I'm alright when I'm with a willing person on a one to one basis, but put me in front of a class of kids, and I'd be awful. Just like Snape." She hesitated. "Worse than Snape, in fact."

"Don't be silly, that's impossible," laughed Harry. He looked at her a little uneasily. "It is impossible, right?"

"I hope so, for your sake," Deanna replied with a grin. "But do remember, I'm Caitlin Tyler's daughter, and my mum is not noted for her self-control at the best of times. I'm no better in that respect, let me tell you! A student crosses the line once too often, and bam! One hexed student."

"Oh, I don't know," Harry reflected. "There's some students I wouldn't mind seeing hexed. Malfoy for one." They both laughed at that. Deanna made no secret of the fact that she hated Malfoy as much as Harry did. Maybe more. Harry and Draco's enmity only went as far back as their first meeting, nearly three years ago now, whereas Deanna's loathing of the Malfoy family was a hereditary thing, going back centuries through generations of Tylers, and the Tal-y-Rhys dynasty that had preceded it. It was of course, mutual, peaking with Lucius Malfoy and Caitlin Tyler, respective heads of family, who as right-hand man of Lord Voldemort and leading Auror had been virtually at war since the Seventies.

Harry wiped his eyes. "Shame your mum's not teaching at Hogwarts. She wouldn't let Malfoy get away with anything, would she?"

"No," grinned Deanna. "My mum rules."

"Must be great, having a mother like yours," said Harry enviously. "Smart, brave, heroic. You must be really proud of her."

"Yeah. I am," said Deanna quietly, looking at a photograph of the two of them together, mother and daughter, that decorated the mantelpiece. Caitlin looked wonderful as always, dressed in a deep purple velvet robe with her hair flowing loose down her back, smiling and laughing with not a care in the world, it seemed. And next to her, Deanna looked no less at ease, dressed in a pair of black jeans, white cotton shirt and black velvet waistcoat, with the usual goth adornments. A recent one, that, taken by a professional wizard photographer in Diagon Alley after Caitlin had decided they should have a proper formal portrait done of the two of them. Several shots had

been taken, although that was the only one Caitlin had put on view, after giving another to Deanna and putting one by her own bed. Deanna sometimes wondered where the others had gone, but hadn't asked. She just assumed her mother had put them away somewhere.

And then Harry broke the moment by venturing straight into the one topic, the one strictly taboo area, that was permanently off-limits as far as Deanna was concerned, the one avenue of conversation that got to her like nothing else. He mentioned her father.

"So what does your dad do, then?" he asked, blissfully unaware of the hornets' nest he was about to walk straight into. "You talk about your mum all the time, but no one ever mentions a Mr. Tyler. What happened to him?"

He wasn't prepared for what happened next. All sisterly feeling vanished from Deanna's demeanour in a second, and the dangerous streak that lurked beneath the surface of every Slytherin ever Sorted surfaced in all its dark glory as she grabbed him by the shirt and glared deep into his eyes.

"Never, ever, mention my father again in my hearing, Harry Potter, or, Boy Who Lived or no, you will find your head shoved into the nearest open fire until the scar's the only bit left that's even recognisable," she hissed savagely at him, before releasing him, letting him fall backwards into his chair, stunned at the transformation that had come over her.

"Sorry," he whispered. "I... I won't."

Deanna for her part seemed to have returned almost to normal, her fury gone as soon as it had come. However, Harry could tell that she was still angry. It just wasn't directed at him.

She was pacing the floor now, staring at her feet, seemingly in two minds as to what to do. However, despite her seeming indecision, the words started pouring out of her as if she couldn't stop herself.

"I don't want him mentioned, I don't want him talked about, I don't want him even thought about. As far as I am concerned, he is dead. If he ever comes near this house, he will be dead. And when I grow up and get my Auror training, I am going to find him and put him through every form of torture known to man. And do you know why I'm going to do all that?" She whirled on Harry with a ferocity that made him shrink back, Gryffindor though he was. He'd seen Deanna angry before, who hadn't? But never this out of control. This went beyond mere anger, all the way to borderline psychosis.

"Why?" he managed to whisper.

"Because he's scum," she spat at him. "He worked for Voldemort, that's why. And him and a little gang of his friends decided one day that it would be a good idea to capture my mother and have a little 'fun' with her."

"Fun?" Harry blinked. "You don't mean..."

"Yeah," snapped Deanna. "Yeah, I do. Nine months later, along I come. Well, nearer to eight actually, but I'm not surprised I was early the state Mum must have been in."

Harry didn't know what to say. He'd overheard Mr. and Mrs. Weasley mention Caitlin Tyler once or twice, with the hushed words "Single, of course," and refer to Deanna as "that poor child", but he'd never known

what they meant. Well, he did now. No wonder Deanna always seemed so tough. Dealing with something like that, she had to be. All of a sudden, he no longer envied her. Better a dead parent than one who'd savaged your mother.

"That's why she's like she is today," Deanna went on, by now sitting down again, hands in her lap, studiously avoiding his eyes. "You know, the indestructible, invulnerable, unstoppable Auror. She never wanted to get hurt like that again, so she's spent the rest of her life constantly training, training, training, always on guard, never relaxing, just in case someone tries to ambush her again. You say you envy her, but you have no idea what it's like, living with someone who you know loves you, but who is never quite there for you, who always has part of her mind constantly scanning for danger, never able to rest or feel safe, always worrying whenever you're out of sight for a second in case something happens to you, because you're all she has. Or worse, dwelling on the past, still stuck in what happened years ago." She shuddered, still looking away. "Gods, what must I remind her of?" she whispered, her voice trembling. "Every bloody day, she has to look at me, and think about how I got here. My god, no wonder she never got over it. Never had a chance, did she, not with me hanging around. God almighty, why didn't she just get rid of me when she had the chance?" he buried her head in her hands. Harry wasn't certain, but he could swear she was starting to cry. Abandoning his normal reserve, he went over to her and gave her a hug.

"Don't cry," he whispered. "Please don't."

"It's alright for you," he heard her say. "Your parents wanted you!"

"Not around to tell me though, are they?" Harry snapped back. "They may have been the most loving, caring people in the world, but I'll never know, will I? Because they're dead. You've still got your mum. Make the most of it, because there's no one that can ever replace your natural parents. And she does care about you, I'm sure. Look at that photo." He indicated the one he'd noticed earlier. "That is not the face of a woman who can't bear to look at you because of what you remind her of. That's the face of someone who's proud to be associated with you."

Deanna looked up. Right at that precise moment, the Caitlin in the picture was smiling fondly down at picture-Deanna, who was grinning right at the camera. The real Deanna couldn't help smiling in turn.

"Maybe you're right," she said softly. "But all the same, I can't shake the feeling that it's not always that way." Looking at the wall clock, she dried her eyes. "Gods, look at the time, she'll be home soon. I'd best get dinner under way. Come on, come and give me a hand." Getting up, she indicated for Harry to follow her into the kitchen.

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Caitlin Tyler arrived home not long after, as Harry was busy slicing and dicing ingredients for use in Deanna's latest culinary creation, which was sizzling away in a frying pan. Chicken cutlets with Deanna's very own Special Sauce on a bed of rice. Could taste very nice, could taste horrible. Smelt good, though.

Caitlin seemed to agree with him, because she seemed to relax visibly after entering the kitchen and sinking into a chair.

"Smells good," she sighed, closing her eyes as she unfastened the straps on her biker boots and kicked them under the table. "What is it tonight?"

"Chicken. Fried in onions with my Special Sauce," Deanna told her as she poked the chicken.

"Nice," murmured Caitlin, rubbing her shoulders. Harry couldn't stop himself thinking about what he'd learned that afternoon, about the hidden vulnerability within, and why Caitlin never let anyone else see it.

It explained a lot, and yet the woman he saw before him didn't look like a trauma survivor. She just looked tired after a long day at work.

"How was work?" he asked, trying to make conversation.

"Not bad. Not good, either," she sighed.

"Still no sign of him?" Deanna asked. No need to wonder who she meant by that.

Caitlin shook her head. "None. We're at our wits' end, although don't tell anyone that. We're trying to look as though we've got a handle on the situation. Not even Mel's got any cunning plans now. It's so frustrating!" She slammed her fist on the desk.

"Is there anyone he might have gone to for help?" Harry asked. "Any friends, family?"

Caitlin laughed bitterly, although Harry noticed a flicker of some indescribable emotion almost like panic in her eyes.

"No. He never had any siblings, both his parents died years ago, most of his former friends were either killed by Death Eaters or work for the Ministry. There's only really one person he might go to for help, and we're watching him closely. No joy there though either. It's as if he's disappeared off the face of the planet." She glanced at her daughter, outwardly calm, but Harry could tell she was more worried than she let on. "So, has everything been alright here? No strangers hanging around or anything?"

Deanna shook her head. "Nah. Nothing interesting. Just another dull, boring day with nothing to do. Because my mother has removed all my civil liberties by confining me to the house all day!"

"You know it's for your own safety," Caitlin snapped. "So, no visitors then."

"No," said Deanna firmly.

Harry wondered idly whether he should tell them he'd seen that black dog again. It had been hanging around in the alley that ran alongside the back fence, watching the house and looking rather sorry for itself. Harry had sneaked some food out to it, taking the opportunity to give it a hug. It had seemed pleased to see him, although it hadn't stayed long. Almost as if it didn't want anyone else to know it was there. Still, it had been nice to see it again. He decided to keep quiet about it. After all, it was only a stray dog. Perfectly harmless.

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The following day, Deanna announced that she had a surprise for him.

"Yes, Harry, I am taking you out."

"Where?" asked Harry, nearly choking on his toast. "I thought your mum had grounded us both?"

"Yes," nodded Deanna, "but she said I can visit the Lovegoods'. And it just so happens that they got back from the States yesterday."

"What, yesterday?" Harry said, confused. "But Mrs. Lovegood's been at the Ministry for the last week, ever since I moved in at least."

"She didn't go," Deanna replied. "It was Mr. Lovegood, Marls, Mr. Lovegood's sister Annabel and her two youngest kids, Rachel and Paul Clearwater. Off on some big science and technology touring extravaganza involving lots of pressing buttons and looking at engine parts. Which I'm sure is some people's idea of fun, but rather them than me all the same. Anyway, seeing as virtually everyone else I know has yet to return from their little jaunts abroad and I'm not spending a minute more stuck here, I'm going to pay the Geek Patrol a visit. Interested?"

"Yeah, go on then." Harry, despite himself, was interested. There didn't seem to be many other opportunities for entertainment going, and all his friends were off on holiday too. Hermione was in France with her

parents, and the Weasleys, thanks to a competition win, were visiting their eldest son Bill in Egypt. While he'd been disappointed to learn on arrival in Magnolia Crescent that Luella was in Italy with Rianne Stormosi, staying at Rianne's aunt's villa near Milan and was not likely to be back much before the start of term.

"Better finish stuffing yourself and get dressed then, hadn't you?" grinned Deanna. "Because Marlie Lovegood's residence is the only house in the country with a dress code."

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Fortunately for Harry, Deanna had been exaggerating about the dress code. After all, Dudley Dursley's hand-me-downs wouldn't have gained him entrance anywhere.

However, he needn't have worried. When he staggered out of the Floo entrance into the Lovegood house, the place seemed deserted.

"Hope they're up," said Deanna, alarmed. "I'd forgotten about jet lag, they're probably still on Florida time."

"Five hours behind us, so that makes it..." Harry looked at his watch. Ten-thirty. Ah. "Half five in the morning. Deanna, they're going to kill us."

"Well, the Floo let us in, so that must count for something. Sukey would have shut it down if no one was up, it's standard security procedure," murmured Deanna. Taking care to move quietly, she slipped out into the corridor, motioning for Harry to follow.

Thankfully, they soon heard voices echoing from the back room. And the one that stood out the most was the unmistakable sound of Marlie Lovegood showing off what were presumably her holiday photos. She'd either had them developed before she left, owned a Polaroid, or had her own dark room. Either was possible.

"And this one is me and Rachel standing next to the Saturn V."

"Looks big," came an oddly familiar boy's voice.

"Oh, it is," Marlie replied. "Biggest rocket ever built. 111 metres tall when upright, that's 363 feet to you uninitiated ones. Produces 7.5 million pounds of thrust on take-off. Big doesn't even begin to describe it."

"Must weigh a ton."

"2812, to be precise," Marlie purred. "Metric tons, that is. Gods know what that is in imperial. And to be honest, the gods can keep it, freaky measuring system that it is."

The boy did not seem too put out at this. "You and your funny little metric system," he laughed. "One day, Lovegood, you will appreciate the beauty and intricacy of imperial measures."

"Or alternately, I could stick with a system that my computer can actually calculate in and that anyone born this century can actually understand," Marlie suggested pithily.

Harry, however, didn't hear Marlie's last remark. The arrogance in the boy's previous sentence had made him realise just where he'd heard that voice before. Quickening his pace, he hurried into the room.

Marlie, hair in bunches, wearing a black t-shirt with a NASA logo emblazoned across the front and a pair of flared jeans, was sitting cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by evidently newly-developed holiday photos. Nothing too disturbing in that. What was unusual was the blond boy sitting next to her, wearing jeans, a Pearl Jam t-shirt, silver chain round his neck, numerous leather bracelets round his wrists, red and black flannel shirt tied round the waist and a few rings that rivalled Deanna's in the goth stakes. A boy well known to both Harry and Deanna, and who had taken one look at

Harry framed in the doorway and leapt to his feet in horror. A boy named Draco Malfoy.

For a moment, both boys just stared at each other in shock. Then came the pointing of fingers, and the mutual cry:

"What's HE doing here?!?"

Draco whirled round to face his cousin.

"You didn't tell me they were going to be here!"

"I didn't think Tyler'd be up, it's not even noon yet," Marlie commented, glancing at her watch.

Draco ignored her and turned back to face Harry, his face pink with rage.

"If either of you breathe a word to anyone about me being dressed like this...!"

"We'll be passing up a very lucrative blackmailing opportunity," replied Deanna, smirking. She wasn't entirely surprised to see Draco here, after all he'd visited last summer. But that had been before he'd nabbed his cousin's place on the house Quidditch team. "So what is he doing here anyway, Marls? I thought you detested him still."

Marlie squirmed. "Well, yeah. I did. But he kinda bribed his way in with some extremely rare Transfiguration books which he nicked from his parents' collection, so I felt I had to repay him somehow." She indicated Harry, who was still standing there glaring at Draco. "So what's up with the Boy Hero then? Isn't it around this time of year that his Muggle relatives lock him up in a cellar and throw away the key?"

"And if not, couldn't they be persuaded to anyway?" added Draco, still bristling.

Harry made to throttle Draco, but a touch on the shoulder from Deanna stopped him.

"Leave it," she murmured. "Now is not the time." She turned back to Marlie. "He's staying with me over summer. He was having problems with the Muggles, and seeing as Sirius Black could be after him, the Ministry have arranged for him to stay with us, seeing as our house is like Fort Knox at the moment."

"Except without anything worth breaking in for," Draco muttered. Fortunately for him, no one heard him, the two girls turning their attention back to Marlie's photos and Harry not being near enough.

"So how was the US of A, then?" Deanna asked, perusing the unmoving Muggle pictures laid out before her. "Fun?"

"Oh yeah," Marlie nodded. "We went everywhere! Universal Studios, EPCOT, Seaworld, Busch Gardens, Kennedy Space Centre, we had a blast! Three weeks of

mayhem. Aunt Annabel and Dad pulled out all their contacts, and we got to see behind the scenes and everything!"

"Except there's no actual photographic evidence of any of this to prove these claims, but don't let that put you off," Draco grinned. At least, he did until Marlie gave him a sharp smack around the back of the head.

"There are no photos, because we weren't allowed to take cameras in, because of the security implications," Marlie retorted. "Now if you don't mind, I was in the middle of showing off my knowledge?"

"Showing off something," Draco muttered. This time, Marlie just glared at him, before resuming her travelogue.

"Now, these ones are of us watching a Shuttle launch. Discovery, I think that one is."

Draco, despite himself, looked interested, peering over Marlie's shoulder.

"What's a Shuttle?"

"NASA's current space craft of choice, used for putting things in orbit," Marlie replied, clearly warming to her subject.

"Bigger than the Saturn?" Draco asked.

Marlie shook her head. "No. But cheaper. It's reusable, mostly. The Saturn V wasn't. All that ever came back was the tiny little cone on top called the Command Module. That was the bit the astronauts flew in."

Draco looked at the Saturn V photos again. "Really?" He shook his head, looking rather less impressed than he had been. "What a waste."

"Let that be a lesson to you, Malfoy," Marlie intoned with a grin. "Size isn't everything."

Deanna glanced at Harry to see if he was as bored by all the techy stuff as she was. To her surprise, he also seemed fascinated, hanging on Marlie's every word. Deanna rolled her eyes. Must be a boy thing.

Marlie too had noticed Harry's interest and was not displeased.

"You always wanted to be an astronaut too, did you?" she laughed.

"Yeah. Well, no. Well, I did, but as soon as I showed an interest, Dudley immediately wanted everything to do with space, and I never got a look in. Kind of put me off a bit," he admitted.

"Aw, you poor thing!" Marlie exclaimed. "Never mind, mate, come and sit with us, and you can indulge in space stuff all you like."

"And if you're really good, Marlie'll build you your very own Saturn V and you can explore far off galaxies and never bother us again," Draco added.

"Draco!" snapped Marlie. "Will you shut up?"

"Sorry," muttered Draco, apparently chastened. Harry blinked. He'd never seen Draco looking so submissive before.

"Thank you," sniffed Marlie. "Honestly, Saturn Vs are so thirty years ago!" Reaching for the photos, she started telling both boys all about space shuttles, and what it was like watching one being launched.

Deanna, by this time bored out of her mind, decided to wander off and leave them to it. Instead, she began investigating the books Draco had bribed his way in with. Scanning the titles, she couldn't help noticing that although they were technically Transfiguration manuals, they were very specialist ones. In fact, they all seemed to be regarding the subject of shapeshifting. Interesting. Very interesting. She glanced at Marlie, who once long ago had declared she wanted to be an Animaga more than anything. Clearly she still did. Deanna fervently hoped that Marlie wasn't engaged in any weird and disturbing experiments in shapeshifting. She dreaded to think what it would be like with Marlie able to turn into an animal at will. The potential for chaos wasn't something she wanted to think about. However, she took some comfort from the fact that Animagism was an incredibly difficult undertaking that took years and years of practice. Reassured, she slipped unnoticed out of the room and into a side room where, with the noise of three worryingly enthusiastic space nerds in the background, she curled up with one of Melissa Lovegood's Auror manuals and lost herself in a world that couldn't be more rooted on the Earth.

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Several hours later, Marlie reflected back on how the day was going. With the space travel discussion long over, Harry and Draco were now entertaining themselves with her Megadrive, busily engaged in inflicting intense pain on each other on Street Fighter II. Of course, some will say at this point that Street Fighter II was never available on the Megadrive, and of course, officially it wasn't. However, that was only for people who didn't have Paul Clearwater as a cousin. The boy was a genius for programming. Wasted on the wizarding world, Marlie considered.

Deanna re-entered at this point, having noticed that the noise from the main sitting room consisted not of abstract technical discussion but of shouts and screams of victory or defeat. She might not have cared much about the space programme, but fighting was something she knew about.

"Everything alright in here?" she inquired.

Marlie nodded. "Yeah, no worries. Harry and Draco are mastering the art of Shotokan Karate and using it to kick each other to pieces, but apart from that, everything's just peachy."

Deanna peered over their shoulders at the screen, where a blond man and a dark haired man by the names of Ken and Ryu were busy aiming some rather brutal looking kicks at each other's heads. So far, Ken appeared to be winning.

"Give it up, Potter," Draco snarled.

"Never," hissed Harry, frantically hitting the buttons on his controller. Deanna winced. Where was the control, the artistry? Harry seemed to be pressing things randomly. He'd never win at that rate.

Sure enough, Deanna was proved right, as with a few quick kicks and a fireball special move, Ken flattened Ryu and Draco threw his controller into the air with a shriek of delight.

"Yeah, baby!" he yelled, flushed with success. "Another win for the master! What's the score now, three-nil to me?"

Harry scowled at him. "You're cheating. I'm not sure how, but you're cheating."

"Actually, Potter, for once I'm not," Draco drawled. "Face it, you're just sore because there's finally something I'm better at than you."

"Am not," muttered Harry.

"Are."

"Not."

"Are."

"Not."

"Are."

"Not."

"Are."

"SHUT UP!" both Marlie and Deanna yelled in unison.

"There are no methods of cheating in the two-player version of Street Fighter II," said Marlie through gritted teeth. "One-player, yes, two-player, no."

"Harry, he was playing better than you," Deanna added. "He was a lot more focused and together. You were all over the place in that last game."

"Tell me about it," muttered Harry, throwing the controller away in disgust.

"See?" crowed Draco. "Just admit that I am the master!"

"Oh, I wouldn't say *that*," Deanna said coolly, picking up Harry's controller. "You're good, I admit." She paused before smiling coldly at him. "But not that good." Starting up another game, she selected a red and yellow beast-man called Blanka as her character, before throwing down the gauntlet to Draco. "Ready to play?"

Draco was no longer smiling. "Bring it on," he snarled, choosing the blond martial arts expert again. And with Marlie and Harry looking on, the battle commenced.

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They passed the rest of the afternoon like that, the four of them taking it in turns to battle each other. Slowly but surely Harry improved, and soon he was capable of beating any of them. Not regularly, to be sure, but nevertheless he was managing some wins.

More surprising than that, however, was a slow but sure change in attitude between the two boys. It was most noticeable when the two girls were playing and Harry and Draco were watching. It was then that Harry found himself actually talking to Draco, actually having a proper conversation, as if with a normal boy his age. True, Draco would do most of the talking, casually pointing out the various tactics used and their relative merit, providing a little running commentary on the fight and the characters. While Harry had no doubt that this was as much an opportunity for Draco to show off his knowledge as for Harry to learn about the game, there was no doubt that Draco knew what he was talking about. Not only that, once Draco had warmed to his subject, all thought of point-scoring seemed to vanish as the obsession with information took hold.

"See, some characters are far easier to get to grips with than others," Draco explained. "While it's possible to win with any of them, some are easy to work with and some take time to master. That was where you went wrong, Potter."

"It was?" asked Harry.

"Oh yes," Draco nodded. "Ryu's notoriously difficult to work with, which, by the way, is why he's billed as the 'star' of the game. More of a challenge. It's actually best to start off with someone a little easier, like Guile or Dhalsim. Blanka's quite fun to play as well."

"What about Ken?" asked Harry, referring to Draco's character of choice.

"Oh, he's rather tricky too," Draco admitted. "Marlie used to win all the time when I used him."

"So why'd you stick with him?" Harry asked, surprised that Draco would deliberately choose a losing character.

Draco ran his fingers through his hair. "The hair, man," he said, grinning. "Gotta love that hair."

Harry could only sigh at the Slytherin's vanity. Evidently in some circumstances, even losing could be preferable to looking uncool. He glanced over at Draco's cousin. Not hard to see where that particular trait had come from. He didn't know Marlie Lovegood that well, but everyone knew that with her, looks weren't the only thing in life, they were everything.

A squeal from the Megadrive indicated that the game was at an end. Blanka was standing victorious over a prone female fighter by the name of Chun Li, and Deanna was looking rather smug.

"Gotcha, Lovegood," she grinned.

Marlie just muttered.

"Which means," Deanna continued, oblivious to Marlie's scowling, "that I've managed to score most victories today and am thus Supreme Street Fighter!"

Marlie glared even harder. Harry smiled and congratulated her, before turning to see what Draco's reaction would be.

To his surprise, Draco looked surprisingly calm. He simply nodded and said:

"Yes, you are. Well done."

Harry blinked, wondering if this was the same Draco Malfoy. He looked over at Deanna and saw she hadn't been expecting that either. Marlie however was just watching her cousin with a raised eyebrow.

"Rather sanguine, aren't we, Malfoy?"

Draco just shrugged.

"My day will come." He looked around the room. "Say, what time is it?"

"Nearly six," Deanna told him. "Mum should be home soon. Harry, we'd better be going."

It was at that point that the Lovegoods' house elf Sukey made an appearance.

"Miss Marlie, you was asking me to tell you when Mrs. Lovegood is arriving."

"She's on her way?" gasped Marlie.

Sukey nodded. "Yes. And she is inviting her friend, Mrs. Tyler, as well. They is both on their way and will be here in a few minutes."

This had an unusually energising effect on Draco and Marlie.

"Caitlin Tyler's coming here?" Draco shrieked. "Oh my god, I've got to get out of here, Marls, where are my robes?"

"Right here." Marlie was already on her feet, throwing a set of black robes in Draco's direction and helping him put them on over his clothes, while Draco hastily began divesting himself of all his Muggle jewellery.

Marlie began shouting instructions at Sukey.

"Sukey, we need a fire in the Floo grate pronto, and some powder at the ready. And when Mum and Caitlin Tyler arrive, do not mention that anyone other than me, Harry and Deanna were ever here."

Sukey did not look pleased with this.

"I is not happy about keeping secrets from Mrs. Lovegood!" she announced rather huffily.

"Sukey, please!" Marlie begged. "Anyway, it's not Mum I'm worried about, she knows he comes here anyway. Just that Mrs. Tyler doesn't approve of Malfoys and I don't want to upset her."

"Very well," Sukey sniffed, "but I is still not liking it!" Turning away, she went off to prepare the Floo.

Draco, by this time, was just about ready to go.

"Think I'll do?" he asked, straightening his robes. Marlie passed her critical eye over him.

"You'll do, but I'd get changed entirely once you're home if I were you. Your father might not notice the trainers and jeans, but your mother will."

"That's alright, it's not Mother I'm worried about," Draco replied. "She already knows where I am, after all."

"She does?" blinked Marlie.

"Oh yeah," Draco nodded. "Who do you think gave me those books I brought you?" Turning away with a smirk, he headed for the already blazing Floo grate, pausing only to call out, "See ya, cous! Bye, Tyler. Bye, Potter," before throwing some powder in the fire and disappearing. Not a moment too soon as it happened. Almost as soon as he'd gone, the front door opened, and Melissa Lovegood arrived, with Caitlin Tyler in tow.

"Afternoon, you three," Melissa said, not in the least surprised to see Deanna and Harry there. "Had a fun day?"

"Yes thanks," said Harry. He wasn't at all sure what to say to her, especially as she was second only to Cornelius Fudge himself at the Ministry. However, she seemed friendly enough.

"Good, glad to hear it. I suppose my daughter's been driving you mad with tales of her American adventure?"

"No, not at all," said Harry, at exactly the same moment that Deanna said "Oh gods yes, she won't shut up."

Both Melissa and Caitlin burst out laughing at this.

"Either one of you is being very diplomatic, or you just don't think much of science, Deanna," said Melissa. "Which do you think it is, Caitlin?"

"Both," Caitlin answered with a grin.

"Deanna's got no understanding of these things at all," Marlie complained.

"It's not that I don't understand them," Deanna pointed out. "I just don't see the point of it all."

"It's interesting, though!" Marlie cried.

"Bits of it are quite interesting," said Deanna. "Parts of it are almost entertaining. But when you lot started comparing technical specifications of rockets, and analysing the make-up of rocket fuel, that went as far into the realms of dullness as it is possible to go without causing everyone in the vicinity to lose the will to live and commit mass suicide."

Everyone except Marlie laughed at this. Marlie folded her arms and sulked.

"Never mind, dear," Melissa said, putting an arm around her daughter. "I'm sure you had a good time. Why don't you tell us all about it over dinner?" She paused, glancing at Caitlin and Deanna, who had both gone rather pale. "Except possibly leaving out the more, er, obscure technical details."

This seemed to cheer Marlie up, and with her usual confidence restored, she followed the others into the Lovegoods' dining room.

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That night, they ate at the Lovegoods', a noisy chaotic meal that, while being more civilised than evening meals at the Weasleys, was still very much a regular family meal as dominated by teenagers.

Marlie did most of the talking, describing her adventures with her Clearwater cousins in America, interspersed with the occasional smart remark from either her brother Mike, or Deanna, neither of whom, it turned out, were remotely interested in anything technical. However, it didn't detract from the narrative. Marlie, despite her annoyance, seemed to thrive on the heckling.

"So Marls, what exactly was the point of the moon landings then?"
Mike Lovegood asked with a grin.

"Point?" Marlie gestured dramatically. "There needs to be a point? It was a major scientific undertaking! We learned a lot about our position in the solar system! Humans got to leave the planet and walk on another world entirely! It had never been done before! It hasn't been done since."

Melissa looked as if she were about to say something, but decided against it. However, Harry noticed that she was smiling slightly, a little 'I know something you don't know' smile that left Harry wondering if perhaps the Muggle Apollo Programme hadn't been the only visit to the Moon recently.

"Not surprised," Deanna remarked, "if it took that great big rocket to get them there, and all of it gets destroyed except for one little bit at the top. Big waste of money if you ask me."

"Now now," said Marlie's father Leonard who, still suffering from jet lag, had remained rather quiet so far. However, he wasn't one to sit back and let his beloved rocket science get insulted. "The space programme led to a lot of technological developments that we simply would never have thought to research if we hadn't needed them for the Apollo programme. For example, all those transistors and microcircuits that power your stereos and games consoles. Then there were the social benefits. If there's one thing that could have the power to stop humanity fighting over trifles, and convince everyone that we are one species, on one planet, and that we need to find a way to get along, it will be the photos the Apollo astronauts brought back."

"Suppose," Deanna shrugged. "But until they start building cities out there, I'm not going to get too interested in it."

"If the Muggles start building cities out there, we may not have a choice," Harry heard Caitlin say quietly next to him.

"Why's that?" he heard himself ask her as the main conversation moved on to other things. "I thought the Moon was lifeless."

"Oh it is," said Caitlin grimly. "To Muggle eyes." However, she refused to be drawn on what there was for a mage's eye to see.

The rest of the meal passed uneventfully, and afterwards, they withdrew to the front room again for more stories with accompanying photos. This time, the theme had shifted to biology rather than physics, with Marlie showing off her Seaworld pictures.

"What's that one?" Deanna asked, pointing at one of Rachel Clearwater with her hand in a shallow pool.

"Rach stroking a manta ray," Marlie told her.

"The next shot on the film is of her screaming in pain as it stings her,"
Mike added.

"Michael!" Marlie snapped. "Pay no attention, Deanna, they were lovely creatures. Really tame, didn't mind being stroked at all. All velvety and smooth. Quite cute, really."

"Yeah, for weird, grey, flat things with bug eyes and a sting," Mike muttered.

From a distance, Caitlin and Melissa watched indulgently as Marlie gave her brother a slap, before indignantly turning back to the photos and continuing the travelogue as if nothing had happened. They were sitting apart, watching the action from a doorway into a side room, of which there were many in the Lovegood house.

"Kids, eh?" Melissa sighed. "Always squabbling. I feel I should tell them off, but to be honest, I really can't be bothered."

"I wouldn't worry," Caitlin smiled. "Harry and Deanna are much the same. Forever picking on each other. Neither of them seems to mind though. In fact, they actually seem to enjoy it. Very strange."

"That's good to hear," Melissa replied, smiling in a surprisingly tender manner. "Glad to see they're getting on. I was worried they'd take an instant dislike to each other and spend the entire summer fighting."

Caitlin shook her head. "No. Harry's not a brat by nature, and it's not like they're strangers. Deanna knows him from school, after all. Besides," and this was the point when Caitlin's considerable maternal side began to make itself shown, "they always got on well before."

Melissa had no need to ask what Caitlin meant by before. Before Voldemort had destroyed Caitlin's family home and killed her mother, the Potters had lived with Caitlin and Medea Tyler at Tal-y-Rhys Manor. Harry and Deanna, both only little at the time, had played together then too, although neither remembered any of that now.

"Didn't Deanna once try and levitate him out of a third floor window?" Melissa asked.

"She was only playing!" Caitlin protested. "Honestly, it wasn't her fault that when she asked how Harry got here, James went and told her he flew in the nursery window from the Summerlands on golden fairy wings. She just wanted to see him fly."

Melissa just about managed to stop herself from bursting out laughing, but it was no easy task.

"Stop it!" Caitlin snapped. "It wasn't funny at the time let me tell you! Lily nearly had a heart attack! Wouldn't speak to me for days!"

"Sorry." Melissa dried her eyes. "Well, at least she didn't drop him."

"That's what I said!" Caitlin pouted. "Rather good magic for a three year old, I thought."

Melissa smiled. "You know, Cait, given that you were all meant to be in fear of your lives, living undercover so Voldemort couldn't find you, you all seemed to have a disturbingly good time at that Manor of yours."

"Yeah," Caitlin laughed. "Yeah, we did. We just had the best of times, James and Lil, and Mum and me and Deanna and Harry, and..." Her voice trailed off, as nostalgia mutated into fury. "Damn him!" she hissed, striking the table, causing even the usually unflappable Melissa Lovegood to jump.

"Caitlin..." she began, reaching out to calm her friend down. Caitlin was having none of it. Burying her face in her hands, she'd begun to cry quietly.

"Why?" she sobbed. "Why'd he do it, Mel? Why?"

"Cait..." Melissa whispered, stroking her friend's arm. The simple gesture seemed to have an effect, as Caitlin lowered her hands, revealing a face streaked with tears.

"Gods, not even Severus's betrayal hurt as much as his," she choked. "At least Severus had always kept me at bay, never let me get close. At least he never made me any promises."

"Caitlin," Melissa soothed, putting her arm round her and leading her over to a small settee in the corner of the room. "Here, sit down, talk, tell me about it."

"Did we mean nothing to him?" Caitlin wept. "Did he really despise us so much that selling us to Voldemort was worth more than his family and friends? More than me?"

Melissa had no answer for that. On the one hand, she knew Sirius Black as well as anyone and had always believed him trustworthy. On the other, someone had to have told Voldemort where they were and

how to get in, and Sirius had been the only one not in hiding who'd known. Not even she'd known exactly until after the whole thing was over.

"He promised me he'd look after me," Caitlin was sobbing. "Said he'd make sure no one ever hurt me again, that me and Deanna wouldn't have to worry about a thing, that he'd always be there for us." Caitlin stared at the ceiling, eyes rimmed with tears but with cold, glittering rage at their core. "In what way is betraying us all to Voldemort looking after us, huh, Siri? In what possible world is getting my mother killed being there for me? Hmm? Tell me, Sirius, tell me!" She raised her voice, shaking her fist at no one in particular.

Melissa looked around, hoping that no one had heard her. Fortunately, it seemed no one had.

"Caitlin, ssh!" she warned her. "They'll hear you, now is not the time. Later, when we've caught him. Then, I'll arrange for you to have a private audience with him before we feed him to the Dementors, with Aurors on the door who can be persuaded to turn a blind eye to any signs of violence from within, and you can shout at him all you want."

Caitlin calmed down after hearing this. "Really?"

"Really," Melissa promised.

Caitlin smiled back. "Cool." Her smile faded. "Reckon we'll find him before school starts?"

Melissa sighed. "Gods know, Cait. Once, I'd have said yeah, no problem, we'll track him down within a week. But now..." She shook her

head. "It's like he's just vanished. What about you, Cait, any news from our occasionally furry friend?"

"None," said Caitlin. "He's not heard from him either, and none of the Aurors have detected anything out of the ordinary around his house, Full Moon notwithstanding." Her expression softened slightly as she turned to her friend. "You should talk to him, Mel. He misses you. I can tell."

"Does he now." There was nothing in Melissa's voice to indicate that this was in anyway something she should care about.

"Yes he does. Come on, Mel, how about it?" Caitlin coaxed. "You three were a great team. Severus, you, Remus, you were the brains of the year. The intellectual dreamers. You could have done great things together. Go on, give him a call! If you, him and Severus put your minds together, you could have Black put away within weeks!"

"He's a werewolf," Melissa stated, her voice cutting off Caitlin's enthusiasm.

"So?" asked Caitlin, wondering what that had to do with anything.

"He didn't tell us he was a werewolf," Melissa snapped. Caitlin groaned inwardly, realising that that particular grudge hadn't gone away, despite the passage of nearly twenty years.

"Yes, well, I admit that maybe he should have told you both himself, and that letting you find out from the Ministry records wasn't perhaps the smartest thing to have done..." Caitlin began. Melissa cut her off.

"Cait. We were his friends. Not his housemates, admittedly, but we were there for him! We did all the nerdy things together that the Gryffindors looked down on as being too unadventurous for them. We studied together, we hung out together, we shared dreams, ambitions, Defence Against the Dark Arts spells. He was the one who talked me into becoming an Auror. We shared everything, Cait. We were close!" Melissa seethed. "And yet he couldn't tell us the biggest secret he had to tell. Severus had to find out first-hand and I had to find out in my first week in the Ministry."

"Maybe he was frightened you'd both hate him," Caitlin said tentatively. "After all, Severus didn't take it too well."

"Caitlin, Remus nearly ripped his throat out," Melissa pointed out. "It's not the best way to break that sort of news to someone. Besides, Severus never has been the most tolerant of people." She lowered her eyes. "But why the hell could he never tell me?"

Caitlin took her friend's hand. "Well, maybe he wasn't sure how you'd react. Maybe he thought you wouldn't want to see him again." She looked the other witch up and down with a knowing glint in her eye. "Looks like he was right."

"Cait!" snapped Melissa. "He let me find out from a Ministry file. Are you surprised I reacted the way I did? Because let me tell you, if he'd been any kind of man, any kind of a Gryffindor, he would have told me himself, before we'd even left school."

"Severus knew too, and you're still talking to him," Caitlin felt obliged to point out.

"True," Melissa admitted. "But then again, I was never dating Severus, was I?"

Caitlin had to admit that did make things a little different.

"And," Melissa continued, "Severus had promised Dumbledore he wouldn't say anything, so he can't really be blamed for that. He did assure me he put every pressure he could on Remus. No, I don't think we can blame Severus. But as for Remus..." She shook her head. "He told the Three Gryffindor Stooges, but left us in the dark! Can you credit the man's mind? Who on earth would pick Sirius Black and friends as a confidant over me and Severus?"

"A Gryffindor?" Caitlin suggested.

"Figures," Melissa shrugged. She noticed the look in Caitlin's eyes. "What? You're giving me the 'stop being unreasonable' look that people always have when they think their friend's being an idiot but are too polite to say so. Stop it at once, that's my job."

"Well, you are!" Caitlin replied. "Look, I'm not asking you to forgive and forget overnight. You don't have to like him! All I'm asking is that you team up with him to hunt down Sirius. If you two put your heads together, you could catch him in a week, I'm sure. I know you're angry, but Mel, there are people's lives at stake here! Harry and Deanna's lives. And mine."

Melissa didn't answer. Caitlin sighed.

"Look, Mel, there's one week to go before school starts. One week to find him before he finds us. Once school starts again, we're going to have to put a guard on Hogwarts. And you know what that means."

Again, no answer. Caitlin felt her level of desperation rising.

"Dementors, Mel! I hate Dementors. Can't stand the things. And I don't want my kids anywhere near them. But if it's a choice between that and having them at Sirius Black's mercy... Mel, please." She stared furiously at her friend, willing her to stop being so stubborn. Unfortunately for her, Melissa was wise to Glamoury and having none of it.

"Caitlin!" she snapped in warning. "Cut it out. Don't even think about using Glamoury on me." However, she seemed to relent a little. "But I will think about it."

"Well hurry up," snapped Caitlin. "Because in seven days, Deanna and Harry are going to be getting their own little taste of Azkaban."

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Chapter Three The Shadow of the Beast

The following day found Melissa and Caitlin's occasionally furry friend in a decidedly unhirsute state, going about his usual morning routine. Well, almost usual. A usual morning did not have two Aurors standing guard outside his house. However, Remus Lupin was determined not to let it get to him.

"Morning!" he called in what he hoped was a suitably cheery voice, as he stepped outside to collect the milk and daily newspaper.

The two Aurors smiled and waved back. They seemed in rather a good mood. Young too. Evidently they hadn't been told about his werewolf status. Mind you, it was New Moon. It was only the Full Moon guards that seemed to be humourless war veterans. Not that he was really surprised.

"Quiet night, was it?" he called to them.

They shook their heads.

"Wouldn't know," the girl Auror answered. "We're the day shift."

"Night shift reckon it was quiet though," the boy Auror added. "Apparently the most interesting thing to happen all night was a fox going through your bins."

"A fox?" asked Remus, suddenly alert. "Are they sure?"

The girl nodded. "Oh yeah. Kelly Giles freaked and Avada Kedavra'ed it." She paused. "Three times."

"She hates foxes," the boy explained.

"I see," said Remus, trying to hide his sense of relief that it had been only a fox and not, say, a big hairy black dog. "Well, I'd better let you two get back to your guard duty. Let me know if Sirius Black turns up, won't you?"

"Will do," they answered, turning back to keeping watch.

Trying not to shake, Remus stepped back inside. Yet again, his conscience nagged at him to tell the Ministry everything, that Black was not just a dangerous dark wizard, but also one of the talented few who had mastered the difficult and dangerous art of Animagism. You should do really, you know, Remus. After all, if he turns up in his dog form, the Aurors won't recognise him and he'll be able to walk right in.

It was true enough. And yet his pride prevented him. Pride... and a certain blonde Head of Department who insisted on watching his every move yet refused to see him herself.

If she comes to me herself, I'll tell her. It was a lie, and he knew it. But even so, Melissa Lovegood being present in person might just persuade him. Come here yourself, Mel, and maybe I'll forget about being one of Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs. Maybe I'll remember the friendship you and Severus showed me from day one. Maybe then I'll be willing to share our secrets with you both. Maybe.

But then again, maybe not. Despite having had twelve years to get used to the idea, he still couldn't square the image of Sirius Black, convict, traitor and mass murderer with the Sirius Black he'd known at school. The charming, handsome, talented young man, who'd been the first to discover his secret. And who had not only not held it against him, but enlisted the aid of his friends in learning how to shapeshift, so that he could have company on those nights when the Moon was full, and the Beast walked abroad.

And who had also manage to jeopardise Remus's other friendships by sending Severus Snape after him on one such night. Gods alone knew

what Sirius had been hoping to achieve. Had he actually meant to kill Severus? Or had he just meant for Snape to find out he was a werewolf and break off all contact for good, thus neatly ensuring that their little group wouldn't be distracted by any outside loyalties? So difficult to tell. But Remus could have cheerfully killed Sirius afterwards, and years later, it hadn't been difficult to believe that Sirius could have gone so horribly bad.

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"What?" Sirius had demanded. "It was only a joke! I was just trying to have a little fun! Lighten up, you lot! Gods, what is your problem?"

"He could have been killed!" Remus snarled back. "Did you ever think about that?"

"Well, yeah, but it's only Snape," Sirius pointed out. "I mean, who cares about him-argh!"

Remus slammed his friend against the dormitory wall.

"He's my friend!" Remus yelled at him. "Yes, Padfoot, we all know you hate him because Caitlin Tyler prefers him to you, but that doesn't mean it's okay to kill him!"

"Moony, he's Snape!" Sirius gasped. "He'd have been alright, he knows more Dark Arts than that Lord Walmart bloke."

"Voldemort," James responded from the doorway, watching the fight with his usual sang-froid. "And yes, Snape might have been alright... but would Moony?"

"What do you mean?" asked Sirius, puzzled.

"What he means," Peter piped up, slipping in behind James, "is that if Snape, on seeing a great big wolf with huge teeth and slavering jaws about to attack him, had

lost it and started flinging lethal hexes around in an attempt to defend himself, he could well have killed our Moony. Did you ever think of that, Padfoot?"

"Well... no," Sirius admitted, shamefaced. "Didn't really think of it that way."

"You didn't think, full stop!" Remus snapped. "You never do, about anyone else that is. Thanks to you, I've lost a friend, could stand to lose my girlfriend, and if Prongs hadn't turned up when he did, I could have ended up a murderer."

"Moony, mate, I'm sorry," whispered Sirius as Remus, his fury spent for now, let him go. "Look, it's OK, no one died, Mel Harker still fancies you, and I suppose it's a bummer about Snape, but you've still got us and he's no great loss, not really - ow!"

Remus, with the wolf lurking inside him still, had lost his temper and punched Sirius squarely in the stomach, before turning and walking out without a word.

"What?" Sirius protested as James Potter and Peter Pettigrew watched him in despair. "Was it something I said?"

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That had been Sirius Black in a nutshell, really. No thought for anybody's feelings but his own. He'd eventually patched things up with him, of course, but things had never been the same since. A certain basic level of trust had been wiped out forever, and it had been that much easier to believe that Sirius would sell one friend to He Who Must Not Be Named, and kill another.

And knowing and accepting that, you still won't tell the Ministry how to find him?

Maybe. If she comes.

Well, brace yourself then, his conscience told him. She's here. "Good morning, Remus," came that familiar voice, crisp and precise as ever,

yet with a coldness it never used to have in more innocent days.
"How've you been?"

"Mel?" Remus asked, blinking. "How did you get in?"

"Floo," Melissa answered, easing herself out of his best armchair.
"We've put in a secure, one-way connection from DDAE HQ to your house. Just in case Sirius Black turns up and we need to get here in a hurry."

"Wonderful," sighed Remus. "Yet another chunk of my privacy mortgaged off to the Ministry. Why not just place a scryscope in my bedroom and have done?"

"Because CCTV's chea- never mind," said Melissa hastily. "May I take it all is well here?"

"Melissa, if it wasn't, I'm sure you'd know all about it before I did," Remus scrutinised her carefully, their long acquaintance making him less rather than more trusting around her. Who knew what sort of surveillance she had him under? He very much

doubted that it was a coincidence that the local Muggle council had chosen the last month or so to start digging up the road outside his house, not to mention carrying out so-called 'maintenance' on the telegraph pole opposite and erecting an alleged 'mobile phone mast' nearby which, despite being sited in an ordinary little village which prided itself on its quaint and picturesque appearance, had attracted not one single complaint. The poker face she was currently wearing did

nothing to ease his suspicions. Nevertheless, it paid to be friendly. "Can I get you anything to drink? Tea, coffee?"

"No, I ate before I left. Besides, this isn't really a social call." Melissa shook off the composed exterior, sighed and looked him straight in the eye, with probably the most honest expression she'd had since she got there. "Remus, I need your help."

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"So let me get this straight," said Remus idly, leaning back on his sofa, watching the Head of the DDAE squirming in the chair opposite. "You've run out of ideas and options on how to catch Black, so you've decided to finally ask me."

"That's not quite how I'd put it- " Melissa began, but he cut her off.

"But that's basically what it boils down to, right?"

She didn't answer.

"Thought as much," Remus murmured. "That famous Slytherin pride wouldn't let you come here if you had any other options."

That got her attention. She looked up sharply.

"And you're such a paragon of Gryffindor bravery, aren't you, Remus?" she snapped. "Shame you weren't brave enough to mention that tiny little detail about your lycanthropy before you nearly ripped Severus's throat open, really. But I'm not going over that again. Let's just say you lost your right to reproach us Slytherins years ago."

"Careful, Mel," said Remus, raising a finger in warning. "You're the one in need of help here, remember?"

He watched with satisfaction as she sat back, seething. However, she had enough self-control to ignore his goading.

"Listen, Remus, I'm not going to argue with you. It's in the past and it can stay there for all I care. If you must know, Caitlin asked me to come."

Remus merely raised an eyebrow. Melissa continued, not a little unnerved by his silence.

"And, well, it's not just me asking! Black's dangerous. He killed one friend of yours outright, and twelve poor souls who got in the way. He

betrayed another to You-Know-Who. And think about it, Remus. Who was it who forced your werewolf issue

right out into the open? You know, if he hadn't sent Severus into the Shrieking Shack after you, your secret would have remained just that. You could have told us both in your own time, when you were ready." Melissa tilted her head to one side, smiling in a strangely hypnotic manner that seemed more suited to Caitlin Tyler than to her. "Think about that one, Remus."

Damn the woman. She'd managed to sum up exactly what he'd been thinking earlier. "Thanks to you, I've lost a friend, could stand to lose my girlfriend, and if Prongs hadn't turned up when he did, I could have ended up a murderer." Yes, Sirius Black had a lot to answer for.

"What did you have in mind?" Remus asked, still wary.

"I'm offering you a job," Melissa said simply. "I've got my Department of Mysteries working overtime on this. Another member of staff would be very helpful, especially one with intimate knowledge of our target."

"You run the Department of Mysteries as well?" Remus asked, incredulous. Was there nothing this woman didn't have fingers in?

"Amalgamated it with the DDAE when it formed," Melissa purred. "We just let them keep their name so they wouldn't object. Effectively though, they work for me."

"Doing all your dirty work for you, hmm?" Remus asked, voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Please." Melissa dismissed him with a wave of the hand. "I have Caitlin for that. No, the Department of Mysteries is responsible for all the magical innovations and strategies necessary to deal effectively with our renegades."

"Dark Arts research." The words were out before he could stop them.

"In a word, yes." If Melissa was concerned by the tone of his voice, she didn't show it. "There's a job vacancy coming up, and I'd like you to join us. Help us work out how to catch Black. Find how he operates, what his weak points are. You know him better than anyone else alive. Remus, we need you."

"I have to develop the Dark Arts as part of this?" asked Remus.

"Not necessarily. As much of this would be centred on strategy and planning as on developing new techniques. We know how to apprehend him, we just need to find him."

"And in return?" Remus asked.

"You get a very attractive pay package, the kudos of helping get Sirius Black off the streets, and a good reference. Something which you of all people could find very useful indeed. Come on, Remus, how about it?"
Melissa coaxed.

"It's touching," replied Remus. "Yet strangely impersonal. Yes, let's give the werewolf a job, let's pick his brains because he's useful and we need him, but don't under any circumstances let your daughter anywhere near him. I see where you're coming from, Mel. And what'll

happen when you catch him? Am I going to stay on as a valued member of the team, or am I going to be shown the door?"

"Remus- " Melissa began. He didn't let her finish.

"Forget it, Mel. I can see exactly how it'll go. You and all your colleagues being nice to my face, but whispering in corners when you think I'm not looking, and generally ignoring me outside of work. And as soon as the merest shadow crosses my reputation, I'm out."

"It wouldn't be like that!" Melissa cried.

"It always has been before," Remus replied.

"Oh for gods' sake!" Melissa sighed, frustrated. "Remus, can't you just this once see the bigger picture? I've got an extremely dangerous killer on the loose, the press and public hounding me to do something, and if he's not caught by September, I've got to send Dementors to guard Hogwarts."

"Hogwarts?" Remus asked, blankly. "Why?"

"Use your head, Remus," sighed Melissa. "Harry Potter and Deanna Tyler are his likely two main targets. We can't risk having them unprotected while they're at school."

"You're prepared to submit three hundred vulnerable young kids to those monstrosities?" Remus asked, amazed. He'd known Melissa was a ruthless pragmatist... but he hadn't known she was that ruthless.

"Remus, I don't have a choice," Melissa said. "I can't risk Harry and Deanna's safety, or that of anyone else at Hogwarts who might get in his way. Remus, my daughter shares a dorm with Deanna, they're very good friends! If he makes for Deanna, my child could be one of the innocent bystanders this time around. I'm not letting that happen, she's already been in a coma twice."

"So I heard," said Remus, remembering the headlines all too well. The Daily Prophet had shrieked for weeks about Albus Dumbledore's alleged lack of concern for safety at Hogwarts. But he also knew that Dumbledore would never willingly suffer Dementors at his school. Some creatures revolted even a werewolf's sensibilities. "But Mel, they're evil things. Ministry control over them is tenuous at best. You're seriously willing to have them near the nation's schoolkids?"

"If that's what it takes," Melissa replied, stony-faced. Remus could only shake his head in wonder, with more than a little grief.

"You've changed, Mel," he said quietly. "You had a heart once."

Melissa winced, but she covered it well, staring back at him without a hint of embarrassment.

"Once. Then somebody went and broke it." She got to her feet. "Are you with us or not?"

Remus shook his head, his mind made up. "No. I could never work for an organisation as callous as yours."

Melissa shrugged. "Fine. Have it your way. Stay on the dole. Your loss, Lupin." She turned and walked out.

"Well. That went smoothly, didn't it Moony?" Remus muttered to himself, instantly regretting the use of the nickname out loud. He had no doubt whatsoever that every sound in the house was being monitored and analysed by his almost-future colleagues at the Ministry. Still, not like it would mean anything to them. He hoped.

However, Melissa's visit had helped him come to a decision about one thing. An owl he'd received only a few days ago with another interesting proposition. Say what you would about Sirius Black, but thanks to him, Remus had received not one but two job offers in the space of a week. Coincidentally, the other one had been from Albus Dumbledore, offering him the role of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. He hadn't been sure about it at first, after all, the presence of a werewolf in close proximity to children had a tendency to make parents

anxious. However, given that the school was now going to have Dementors hovering around it anyway, one more Dark creature wouldn't make much difference. And a Dark creature that happened to know quite a bit about how to deal with Dementors would be a positive bonus. He reached for a parchment and quill to owl back a response.

"Albus," he murmured, "you just found yourself a new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher."

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"You're not telling me some poor unfortunate actually accepted?" Severus asked, eyebrow raised. "Good gods, Albus, how desperate are they, to come here? Have they not heard that the job's jinxed?"

"Oh yes, he knows all about his predecessors," Albus replied. The two men were seated in Snape's office, enjoying one of Severus's better brandies. "Fortunately for us, it doesn't seem to have put him off. He seemed to think it was imperative that he join us as soon as possible."

"As soon as possible?" Severus blinked before looking at Albus warily. "He seems keen. Too keen. What's his story? What's he running from?"

"Nothing as bad as you think," Albus smiled. "No, it so happens that Dark creatures are a speciality of his, and seeing as the Ministry has decided to grace us with half the Dementors of Azkaban this year, he seemed to think he'd be needed."

Severus had to agree with that. Someone accustomed to dealing with Dementors and their ilk could only be a good thing.

"Can't argue there. About time we had a Defence teacher who knew what he was talking about."

"Is this the point where you start complaining about getting overlooked again?" Albus asked, a twinkle in his eye.

"Not at all. You know I only allow that particular rumour to circulate in order to keep Defence teachers on their toes and amuse the students. To be honest, Albus, I just want to see someone competent teaching it."

"Well, you'll certainly have that this year," Albus promised. "This man's got a wealth of practical experience behind him. However, there is just one tiny little problem, and that's why I wanted to talk to you."

Severus didn't answer, merely indicated for Albus to continue. Instinct told him that this was not going to be good news, and it was going to be particularly unwelcome for him.

"You see, Severus", Albus continued, "this particular teacher has, how can I put this? Special needs."

"Oh gods." Severus put his head in his hands. That could mean anything from deformities to a deadly curse to being a completely different species. Still, they already had a ghost, a half-giant, an extortioner, a half-goblin in the form of George Flitwick and a vampire in the person of Lucita Sinistra on the staff. 'Unusual' teachers were hardly rare among the Hogwarts faculty. However, there was something about Albus's manner that seemed to indicate this one was different. "What is he? He's not under a deadly curse, is he?"

"Not exactly," said Albus, looking a little uncomfortable.

"He's not been changed into an animal, has he? Don't tell me Hagrid's got to act as translator."

"No, no, that won't be necessary," Albus laughed. "He's human most of the time."

"Most of the time?" Severus sat upright, the sense of impending doom that had been hanging over him ever since this conversation started now practically screaming in his ear. "What do you mean, most of the time? Albus, what have you hired now?"

"He's a werewolf," Albus admitted.

Severus fell back in his chair, rather relieved. He'd been worried for a minute there that Albus had hired a Gorgon or one of the centaurs or something like that. The school had had enough of things that could kill with a look last year, and while he had nothing against centaurs, Hogwarts just wasn't built to accommodate teachers with four legs and hooves. At least lycanthropy was controllable.

"OK... So you've got a werewolf teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts. Alright. If you think he'll manage it, I won't object." He narrowed his eyes. "Might I ask where I come in to all this?"

"Well, Severus, what with him turning into a ravenous animal for three nights a month, we're going to need some way of reining him in, for the students' sake."

"Obviously," murmured Severus, beginning to see where this was going. "And you want me to arrange this, I take it."

"Are you volunteering, Severus?" Albus beamed. "Thank you very much, I was going to ask Hagrid to built a secure pen for him, but if you're offering your services..."

"Albus, if you think I'm wrestling with a werewolf, you've got another think coming," Severus warned him. "I had enough of that at school, thank you."

A little flicker passed across Albus's face, but it was soon gone and Severus appeared not to notice it, for which Albus was truly thankful.

"Oh no, Severus, nothing so bad as that," Albus reassured him. "No, I was thinking more of using your magical skills. Specifically, your renowned expertise at Potions."

Severus sighed. Somehow, he'd thought it would come to this.

"You want me to make him some anti-lycanthropy potions."

"Could you?" Albus asked, ever hopeful. "I mean, I know there's no way of curing it permanently, but I've heard that there are potions available that can suppress it..."

"You're in luck," growled Severus. "There's a new potion just come on the market dealing with that very thing. Called the Wolfsbane potion. Calms the Beast and allows the patient to retain his mind throughout the transformation, if not his physical form. Under the influence of Wolfsbane, the werewolf still changes into a wolf, but remains sane and in control, a danger to no one. Is that the sort of thing you were looking for, Albus?"

Albus clapped his hands, delighted. "Wonderful, dear boy, quite wonderful! Can you make it?"

Severus looked back at him, mildly contemptuous. Albus, realising his mistake, coughed nervously.

"Silly me, of course you can make it. There isn't a potion in existence that you can't make, is there?"

"None worth bothering with," Severus yawned. "If I can brew that wretched Deadly Nightshade potion to calm Lucita's bloodhunger, I can certainly deal with this."

"Splendid!" laughed Albus. However, something occurred to him that put a stop to his levity. "Er, Severus, there aren't any side-effects to this potion, are there?"

"None that I know of- oh. Wait. There is one thing."

"And that is...?"

"Well, you know that normally, a werewolf only actually transforms when the light of the Full Moon is on him..."

"Yes..." Albus watched Severus, a little worried. This sounded ominous.

"Well... when he's dosed with Wolfsbane, he's a wolf all the time."

"All the time?" Albus blinked. "What, for the whole month?"

"No, just the three days and nights around Full Moon," said Severus.

"That's the only time he'll need the potion, after all." He regarded Albus with the merest hint of mirth. "He's going to be clocking up an awful lot of sick leave, Albus."

The headmaster didn't seem too worried. "Not to worry, I'd anticipated something of the sort. Which leads me on to my next request."

"You mean to tell me there's more?" Severus rolled his eyes. "Oh, the perils of a reputation for competence. Go on. Hit me with it."

"You may not be so sanguine when you hear what it is," the older man warned him. "If our friend is to be off sick every month, I'm going to need someone to cover his classes, and I was wondering, if perhaps you don't mind..."

Severus was not slow to grasp his meaning.

"Let me get this straight, Albus. Not only do I have to spend valuable time making his potion, I also have to take his classes as well. Albus, am I going to have any time to do my own work this year?"

"You won't have to take all of them!" said Albus. "We'll all take it in turns to cover for him, you'll only have to take a few every month."

"Won't that be special," Severus muttered. "I tell you what, Albus, he'd better be a bloody good teacher after all this. I'm not going to all this trouble for just anyone."

And now came the moment Albus had been dreading. Making a mental note to make sure there was nothing between him and the door, Albus braced himself. Not that he was exactly afraid of Severus, but he wasn't as young as he used to be, and Severus was a volatile man at the best of times.

"Oh, he's good alright. Very good. In fact, you've experienced his skills yourself before now."

Severus blinked. "I have?" He frowned, trying to think of anyone skilled in Dark Arts who also happened to be a werewolf. "It's not an ex-Auror, is it?"

"Oh no. Nothing like that. This man's never worked for the Ministry in his life."

"Then who..." His voice trailed off as another memory rose unbidden, a memory of another time, when he was still fresh-faced, relatively innocent and not nearly as cynical. Of a once-friend who'd been the first to start that cynicism. A friend skilled in Defence Against the Dark Arts, who also happened to be a werewolf. "Lupin," he whispered, a rage he'd forgotten he was capable of feeling rising within him. "You've hired Remus Lupin!"

Somehow, Albus managed to stay calm. Severus might be short-tempered, it was true... but Albus Dumbledore was not easily cowed.

"Yes, I've hired Remus Lupin. Well done for guessing."

Severus stared uncomprehendingly at him.

"You can't hire him!" he raged.

"Why not?" asked Albus, feigning innocence. "I am Headmaster after all."

Severus nearly choked on his brandy.

"Why not?" Severus screamed. "He's a fucking werewolf, that's why not!"

"That didn't seem to bother you earlier," Albus pointed out.

"I didn't know it was Remus fucking Lupin earlier!" Severus yelled, slamming his hand on the desk. "Albus, I am not, repeat, not working with that man!"

Albus rolled his eyes. He'd expected this sort of reaction from his Potions teacher. In fact, Severus was actually taking it better than he'd thought. He'd asked Caitlin for advice on dealing with an angry Severus earlier and she'd told him to take it in his stride and ignore him - Severus Snape ranting and screaming was far less dangerous than Severus Snape cold and sarcastic. Advice worth following.

"Too late, Severus. All the documents are signed. He starts work on September the first, and there's nothing I can do now even if I wanted to. You're going to be co-workers whether you like it or not, so you might as well get used to it."

Severus let out an incoherent scream. "Albus...!" he managed to cry. "How could you do this to me? Having to work with... talk to... gods forbid, co-operate with... him??"

Albus looked at him sadly. "He was your best friend once."

"Once!" snarled Severus. "Not now. He lost my friendship a long time ago."

"He can't help being what he is, Severus," Albus reminded him, gently.

"That was never the point Albus, and you know it," hissed Severus. "The point was, he chose Black and Potter over me. He told them before I even suspected a thing. If I

hadn't seen him in a transformed state, he might never have told me. And even when Black nearly turned him into a murderer, he still preferred their company to ours. The coward never did admit it to Mel, even after I knew. She had to find out from Ministry records, Albus." Severus's rage appeared to have abated, but there was no mistaking the fire in his eyes. "He was the love of her life, Albus, and he broke her heart. I'm not forgiving him for that in a hurry."

"She seems to have recovered well enough," Albus observed. "She's been married nearly twenty years, after all. Her and Leonard are happy together, aren't they?"

"I don't doubt that," Severus snapped. "But I do doubt that she'd have given him a second glance if she'd still been with Lupin."

"That's as may be, Severus," said Albus, growing weary. "But it's also a matter for Melissa Lovegood, not you. I'm not asking you to be his friend, Severus. All I ask is that you be civil to each other if possible, and avoid each other if not."

"And cover some of his classes every month," Severus added. "And make his blasted Wolfsbane potion."

"If you don't make that potion, he'll be a danger to the school and everyone in it," Albus replied. "Do you want that on your conscience if he breaks loose and kills someone?"

"No," muttered Severus. He glanced up. "But I would take great pleasure in saying 'I told you so'."

"Severus!" Albus warned him. Severus, seeing that the Headmaster was in no mood to argue, resigned himself to fate.

"Alright," he sighed. "I'll do as you ask. But don't expect me to be friends with him! As far as I am concerned, he's nothing but a wolf who looks human most of the time."

Albus hung his head. He hadn't really expected much better, but it was still a disappointment to see Severus show such hatred for someone he'd once loved like a brother. Still, they would be interacting on a regular basis over the next year - would have to say something to each other when Severus brought Remus his monthly Wolfsbane potion. As long as that channel of communication remained open, there was always hope.

Always hope... if, that is, Severus didn't let his pride and stubbornness get the better of him.

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"Now you will be alright, won't you Severus?" Augustus Snape fretted. "You're still sure you want to go to Hogwarts? Not too late to go to Durmstrang with your sister."

"Yes, father, I'm sure," said Severus through gritted teeth. "Besides, Mother is even now taking Rina to Newcastle to meet the Durmstrang ship. I don't think they're going to be too pleased if I suddenly decide I want to go with them, are they now?"

"Not to mention the fact that the train leaves in five minutes," came the ever-so-slightly mocking tones of Narcissa Harker. "Too late now, kiddo. Anyway, my little sister has her heart set on you being there to help her settle in." The blonde, brazen third year with a cool self-

confidence more befitting a twenty-three year old than the thirteen year old she really was sashayed past Augustus Snape and placed a less than reassuring hand on young Severus's shoulder. "You don't want to upset my little sister, do you?" she purred.

"As if I would," Severus said, all innocence. Despite Narcissa's predatory appearance, deep down she was rather more charitable than she seemed, and Severus knew it. "I'd never be able to sleep again."

"Now, now, Narcissa," Augustus intervened, trying ineffectually to restore a sense of adult authority. "I'm sure Severus has nothing but your sister's best interests at heart. Why, I daresay he gets on better with your sister than he does with his own."

"That's because my sister's a spoilt brat, and Mummy's little princess," Severus muttered under his breath. However, he took care not to let his father hear him. Augustus Snape, for reasons that permanently eluded Severus, seemed convinced that his daughter was nothing but a paragon of virtue, an angelic creature come direct from Elysium. Narcissa, however, caught every word and grinned knowingly. She wasn't fond of Severina Tyler either. There was room for only one spoilt, stuck-up charmer in Whitby's magical community, and Narcissa tolerated no rivals.

By contrast, Narcissa's younger sister Melissa wasn't even in the running. A shy, nervous intellectual, dressed in her sister's cast offs, which didn't fit and didn't suit her, and with large eyes hidden behind a pair of glasses which were unfashionable when Zeus was a boy, Melissa's usual gut reaction when faced with social situations was to squeak and run. Of course, it didn't help having an older sister like Narcissa, particularly when said older sister took every opportunity to tease her mercilessly. However, when Severus was around, she seemed to come out of her shell.

"Severus!" she breathed as she approached, detaching herself from her father's side and rushing over to greet her friend. "You are going!"

"Of course I'm going to Hogwarts," Severus growled. "It's seven years without my sister, you seriously think I'm turning that down? Yeah, right."

"Wish I had that," Melissa sighed, shooting a poisonous glance at her sister. "But as long as you're around, I'm sure I'll be OK."

Severus was sure she would too. As the train pulled out, with the two of them settled into a compartment on their own, Melissa seemed to have left her shyness back in King's Cross.

"This is going to be so cool!" she enthused. "No parents, no Rina, not nearly as much Narcissa, and books! Lots of books! Learning stuff. Reading! Being actually told to read! Severus, this is going to be pure heaven!"

"Mel," Severus replied, "you know you're my best friend and I love you to bits. But seriously, you're going to have to tone down the enjoyment of reading and studying once you get there. Otherwise everyone'll think you're a nerd."

Melissa looked disappointed. "Why?" she asked, confused. "Aren't we supposed to be working?"

"Yes, Mel," Severus sighed. "Officially. Our teachers will want us to work. But if you want to make any friends other than me, you'll have to be prepared to let your hair down and live a little."

Melissa froze, her pale northern complexion growing paler yet. "What?" she squeaked, fingering one of her plaits nervously. "You... you mean... like... talking and, and socialising and... making people like me?" She began to whimper. "Oh no, Severus, I can't! My palms go all sweaty, and I start trembling and I never know what to say. I don't think I can do it, Severus!"

"Oh Mel, stop it," Severus soothed her, moving to sit next to her, giving her a hug. "You'll be fine. I'm sure you'll end up in Ravenclaw anyway, surrounded by everyone else who lives for reading, having the time of your life in the rarefied atmosphere of genius while I will no doubt end up in Slytherin having to fight for survival every night because my dorm mates are all jealous of my undeniable superiority in, well, everything."

This did not comfort her in the slightest. "Nooo!" she gasped. "I don't want to be in a different house to you! I'll hardly see you! I'll be all on my own! Severus, please!" She flung her arms round him.

Severus tried his best to comfort her, and was just starting to succeed when two other boys chose that moment to burst in.

"Oi, oi!" yelled the first one, a tall, solidly built dark haired boy who would later be known to all magekind as Sirius Black, mass murderer and traitor. "What have we got here then? No, no," he gestured as Severus and Melissa sprang apart, "don't stop on our account. We don't want to interrupt your little lovers' tryst, do we Potter?"

"Go away," snarled Severus, reaching for his wand as he got to his feet, pushing Melissa behind him.

Sirius turned to his friend, a medium-sized boy with floppy dark hair and blue eyes. "We've got a right one here. Half my size and thinks he can take me in a fight. Poor sod."

"Now, now, Sirius," said the other boy amiably. "I hope you're not going to start getting into trouble already. We're not even there yet." He stepped forward, all smiles.

"Sorry about him. He has no idea when to stop, sometimes. I'm James Potter. Pleased to meet you." He held out his hand in greeting. Severus did not take it.

"Severus Snape." He indicated the other boy with a nod of the head. "You always hang out with meat heads like that?"

James looked hurt. "He's not that bad," he said defensively. "He's just... a bit overbearing now and then. But he's sorry if he offended you. Aren't you, Sirius?" Sirius glared at Severus darkly, not mollified in the slightest. In fact, hearing Severus introduce himself had seemed to anger him more. However, James's influence reined him in.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"Quite alright," Severus said coldly. "And she's not my girlfriend. We're just friends."

"Are you now?" asked Sirius, his attention caught. "So that means she's single, does it?" Stepping forward, he stood next to a horrified Melissa. "What's your name then, gorgeous?"

Melissa's mouth dropped open, but she recovered herself. Taking a few lessons from Severus, she snapped back, "Melissa Harker."

Sirius's eyes widened. "Not related to that fancy piece third year, Narcissa Harker, are you?"

"She's my sister." Melissa tossed her head back, glaring at him. "What's it to you?"

"Just that she's known as a bit of a goer, and I was wondering if it runs in the family, like," Sirius leered as his arm shot out and grabbed her round the waist. Melissa shrieked in outrage, while Severus could take it no longer. Physically weaker he might well be, but he wasn't about to let anyone treat Melissa Harker that way.

"Get your hands off her!" he snarled, grabbing Sirius by the front of his robes and thrusting him back. "I'm warning you now, touch her and I'll make you wish you'd never been born!"

Sirius's eyes narrowed to a look of pure hate. "And gods know your family would love that, wouldn't they?" he hissed, before striking back, hitting Severus square on the jaw.

Severus staggered back, reeling in shock. But he didn't have time to do anything else as Sirius was on him, hitting him again. Reacting instinctively, spurred on by the sound of Melissa screaming, he hit back, trying to do whatever damage he could.

And then the compartment door slammed open, and he heard James Potter talking rapidly to someone else before two pairs of hands grabbed Sirius Black and hurled him into a corner. As he straightened up, Severus was gratified to see James Potter angrily yelling at his friend, shoving him roughly out into the corridor and giving him a more than justified earbashing. Then he looked up and saw that someone else had

entered the room. A boy roughly the same height as himself, with reddish-brown hair curling around his ears, a look of concern and the most striking eyes Severus had ever seen, amber eyes that seemed to see right through you.

"Are you alright?" the boy asked, sounding genuinely worried.

Severus nodded gruffly. "Yeah. I'll be fine." He clutched his stomach. "I'm just a little winded, that's all." He winced, still smarting from where Sirius had hit him.

"You're not alright, you're bleeding," the other boy said decisively, running a finger over the stream of blood trickling from Severus's mouth, and what looked like the beginnings of a black eye. "Here, let me, I've got a healing potion in here somewhere."

"You carry healing potions on you?" Severus asked in amazement as the boy passed him a small phial and started using healing charms on the visible wounds.

"Oh yes," the boy nodded. "You can never be too careful. Never know what might happen." He finished his work and looked back in satisfaction. "There! Good as new."

Melissa, who'd been watching, terrified, raced over to his side. "Severus! Are you alright?" she gasped, throwing her arms around him. "Oh my god, Severus, you could have got really hurt, what were you doing?"

"Standing up for you, as I recall," Severus said gruffly. "You don't mean to tell me you enjoyed that moron perving all over you?"

"Well, no," Melissa admitted. "But you really could have been hurt there! Oh Severus, I don't want you getting hurt over me."

"Get used to it, kid," Severus told her. "Although next time, it won't be fists we'll be using, it'll be magic, and then," he grinned, savouring the thought, "I'll have him."

"I hope you're not going to make a habit of this," said the other boy, alarmed. "I don't want to have to break up fights every day."

"Well, if he stops harassing my friends, there won't be a problem," Severus replied coolly. He met the boy's eyes again. "But thank you," he said graciously. "I don't believe I caught your name."

"Remus Lupin," the boy replied with a smile, holding out his hand. This time, Severus took it.

"Severus Snape." They shook hands. Severus let him go, before beckoning Melissa forward. "Allow me to introduce Melissa Harker."

Melissa stepped forward timidly and looked up at Remus. They locked eyes, and in that one moment, something in the room changed forever. Remus started smiling and couldn't stop himself, while Melissa stared right back, shyness forgotten as she gazed at him in wonder.

"Hello," she whispered. "Pleased to meet you."

"Ah, er, um, well, yes, likewise," stammered Remus, suddenly blushing furiously. Severus rolled his eyes. He should have guessed something like this would happen sooner or later. Still, he couldn't fault Melissa's taste. There was something about Remus Lupin you couldn't help being drawn to, some strange magnetism that hung over him, something that made you look twice, even though he seemed no more extroverted and attention-seeking than Melissa was. Severus suddenly knew he wanted to get to know this boy better, much better. So much the better then if Remus and Melissa did fancy each other. Still, given that they both seemed to have been struck dumb, he decided to give them a hand.

"Melissa's very into Defence Against the Dark Arts," Severus said. "Her father's Mandragor Harker of the DMLE."

"I know the name," said Remus distantly. He shook himself out of his reverie, sadness in his eyes. "Oh yes, I know that name alright." He forced a smile. "I like that sort of thing too. That and Potions are the two subjects I'm most looking forward to."

"Really?" Melissa's eyes widened. "Severus likes Potions and Defence Against the Dark Arts too, don't you Severus?"

"I like to think I'll do well at them," Severus murmured with a smile. He indicated Melissa with a nod. "Melissa though is looking forward to History of Magic. Don't even ask me why."

"Those who don't learn their history are destined to repeat it!" Melissa retorted. "It could be useful."

"You see what I have to put up with," Severus told him ruefully. "I am stuck with Book Nerd for probably the whole of my school career." He went down on his knees before Remus in a comically exaggerated

fashion. "You have to help me! If you and I work together, maybe we can find her a life. Together, Remus, we can have her interacting with people for a change."

Melissa shrieked with laughter.

"Severus!" she gasped. "Stop it at once! Honestly, you make me sound like Jilly No-Mates." She turned to Remus. "Ignore him, he's always like this. His paternal grandparents were actors and he's always over-dramatising things."

Remus hauled Severus to his feet with a grin. "Is that so? Sounds good to me." He clapped Severus on the arm. "Count me in. Book Nerds and Actor Wannabes are two of my favourite types of people."

"Gods forbid anyone'll ever see me on stage," Severus muttered. However, he wasn't really annoyed and, a few games of Exploding Snap and much discussion about matters esoteric later, it was if they'd all known each other forever.

How things change, thirty eight year old Severus thought bleakly after Dumbledore had left. Nowadays, he couldn't stand the sight of the man. Couldn't stand remembering how he'd once spent hours following Lupin around, hanging on his every word, liking nothing better than to sit there watching him. It had been almost like being in love, except without the pressure to do anything about it and the desperate desire to be loved back just as intensely. Just this wonderful sense of happiness when he was around. And then he'd discovered that the boy he adored was really a Dark monster. And not only that, but one who'd

been willing to lead another friend along, lying to her for the sake of his own personal happiness. He could have overlooked his own pain, but seeing Melissa hurt was something else entirely.

Thinking of her jolted him into full awareness. Oh gods, she probably didn't know yet. Someone was going to have to tell her, he couldn't let her find out from Ministry records again. With a sinking feeling in his stomach, he realised it was going to have to be him.

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"REMUS LUPIN???" Melissa shrieked. "Severus, please. PLEASE tell me you're joking!"

"I wish I could," Severus replied gently, placing a hand on her shoulder. She was sitting in the best chair in his office, the one Severus usually used but had uncharacteristically given up for her. "But Albus was quite adamant. Lupin's already been hired, he starts when term does, and there's not a single damn thing either you or I can do about it. Mel, I'm sorry."

Melissa buried her head in her hands, completely undone. "Not him," she whispered. "Anyone but him. Please no, not him."

Severus perched himself on the arm of the chair, drawing the stricken woman into a hug. "Mel, don't. It'll be OK. I'll be the one dealing with him day in, day out, you won't have to even see him if you don't want. It'll be alright, love."

Melissa shook her head furiously. "It isn't that!" she cried. "It's not me I'm worried about, it's my kids! Severus, I don't want him near them!"

Severus ruffled her hair, not a little alarmed at this. "Mel, sweet, he's going to have to have some contact with them if he's going to be their Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. It's Michael's favourite subject after all, and it's still compulsory for Marlene, who by the way also shows considerable talent in that field."

Melissa shuddered. "Oh gods. My poor child, anything could happen to her, she's young, impressionable, vulnerable, if anything dangerous happens in the school, it's nearly always her who gets it, and he'll know she's mine, he'll know!" she gasped. "Mike's eighteen soon, he's a

seventh year prefect, he can take care of himself, but Marlie's only a kid still!"

"Not that much of a kid," Severus felt obliged to point out. "She's a young woman, Mel. Anyone with eyes can see that."

"Exactly," Melissa snapped. "That's the most dangerous part. She looks like a woman, she thinks she is a woman, but she's still a girl really. She could get hurt so easily, and I don't want that happening to my little girl!" She stared helplessly at Severus. "I don't want him to hurt her, Severus!"

As bad as things were between him and Remus Lupin, Severus felt honour bound to defend him.

"Mel, I'm sure she'll be alright, I mean she's not the type to get upset easily after all. And Lupin's many things, but he's no sadist. I'm sure he wouldn't deliberately do anything stupid. He's going to be a teacher after all, how many opportunities is he going to get to talk to her about anything but her homework and why she hasn't done it yet?"

"He's unreliable," said Melissa pointedly. "He means well, but he's got no willpower. A lot of werewolves are like that, the Beast's monthly ravages erode their desire to do the right thing eventually. Give him a difficult choice and he'll go for what's easiest for him, as I believe you know."

Severus had to admit it was true. Ever the introvert, exposing himself to conflict and harassment had never been Lupin's style. Not even with friendship at stake, he reminded himself bitterly.

"All it'll take is one inappropriate remark, one lapse of self-control, and that'll be it," Melissa said, becoming more anxious by the second. "Her peace of mind will be gone. If he says something to her about the past, or tries to use her as a means of getting at me, or gods forbid, trying to get me back, much good that'll do him, I don't know what I'll do. I couldn't bear it if anything happened to her, Leonard would go ballistic and he's the last person I want involved with this. Severus, what am I going to do, she's still my little girl!" She clutched his hand, staring up at him, eyes imploring him to do something.

"It'll be alright," Severus soothed her. "I'll make sure nothing untoward happens. I'll keep an eye on them both, promise."

"Really?" Melissa asked, surprised.

"Yes, really," Severus promised. "I'll look after Marlene for you, make sure she's alright. And I'll keep watch on him too. Make sure he knows what the boundaries are, and that he keeps well on the right side of them. Trust me, Mel, he'll behave himself. I promise."

"Oh, Severus, will you?" Melissa sighed. "That would be wonderful, thank you!" She flung her arms around him. Severus returned the hug with a small, cruel smile. Yes, Remus Lupin would behave himself. Melissa had already shed enough tears over the werewolf in the past. Damned if her daughter would go through the same.

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Chapter Four Home Truths and True Houses

Unlike Severus and Melissa, Caitlin was rather less surprised at the news of Remus Lupin's appointment as the new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. Mainly because it had been her who'd suggested him to Dumbledore in the first place. However, what she wasn't prepared for was Severus Snape and Melissa Lovegood turning up jointly at her house at ten o'clock that evening.

"What on earth are you two doing here at this time of night?" Caitlin asked, amazed. She began to grin. "Let me guess, every pub in the country's barred you so you've both turned up here hoping for a free drink, right?"

"And let's face it, Cait, there's not a house in the land better stocked than yours, is there?" Melissa flung back. "Let us in, we need to talk. Something's come up."

Caitlin was on the defensive immediately. "Have you caught him?" she whispered.

Severus shook his head. "Regrettably, no, not unless your department have been busy, in which case I'm sure you'd already know by now. No, this concerns Hogwarts."

This did nothing to ease Caitlin's mind, as she could easily guess what this concerned. Sighing, she let them both in. Best to get this over with. Leading her guests into the living room, she addressed the two teenagers busy playing Connect Four.

"Bed, you two. I have visitors, and this discussion's not for your ears."

Deanna looked up and smiled to see her teacher and godmother enter.

"Hi, sir. Hi, Auntie Mel." She looked curiously at them both. "What's up? You look like someone's died."

"Not something you need to bother yourself with," Severus told her. "I dare say your mother will tell you when we're done." He suddenly noticed Harry sitting there and froze. Turning to Caitlin, he hissed, "What's he doing here?"

"He lives here," Caitlin replied frostily, daring Severus to argue. "Got a problem?"

Severus groaned, but did not press the point. Caitlin turned her attention back to the two youngsters. "Well? Are you two going or not?"

"Yeah, yeah, we're going," Deanna sighed, packing the game away. Beckoning for Harry to follow her, she left.

As soon as the children had left, the three of them sat down.

"So what's the problem?" asked Caitlin wearily. "Can't be the Dementors, you've both known about that for weeks. Let me guess. Albus finally hired a new Defence teacher."

"He did," said Severus woodenly.

"And?" Caitlin asked, hoping for a little more reaction than that.

"Lupin," seethed Melissa. "He's hired Remus Lupin!"

They both watched Caitlin expectantly, hoping for a shared sense of outrage. They were both proved wrong, as Caitlin smiled, apparently delighted.

"Oh, he did say yes! Good, I was hoping he might. About time they had a decent teacher, this year of all years."

Severus and Melissa stared at her as if she'd gone mad.

"Good?" Melissa demanded. "How can it be good? My ex-boyfriend is going to be teaching my kids!" She hung her head in her hands, completely demoralised. "This is probably the worst thing to happen to me since I dumped the bastard, and you're sitting there saying it's a good thing? Not to mention the fact that he's a w-"

"Stop!" Caitlin ordered, rising swiftly to her feet and cutting Melissa off in mid-sentence. "Don't say another word." Marching over to the door, she wrenched it open and looked contemptuously down at the two

teenagers kneeling before her, who had evidently had their ears pressed to the door. "Gods, but you two are so predictable," she sighed. "Go on, bed! Now," she said sternly, adding a little touch of Glamoury for good measure.

Harry, who had been staring straight up at her, caught the full force of intimidation and found himself turning guiltily away, slinking off in shame. Deanna, however, resisted rather better, being more used to her mother's tricks. However, she wasn't that immune.

"Well?" asked Caitlin, tapping her foot impatiently. Taking the hint, Deanna mumbled an apology and disappeared in the general direction of the stairs. With an amused shrug, Caitlin closed the door and, lavishing it with a few Secrecy Charms for good measure, returned to her friends. "Sorry about that," she apologised. "Teenagers, eh? Now where were we?"

"Cait, there's going to be a werewolf teaching our kids!" Melissa urged. "Don't tell me you're not concerned about Deanna. Or Harry for that matter!"

"Actually, I'm not," Caitlin retorted. "I know Remus. I trust him. Twenty eight days of the month, he's one of the nicest people you could know. And he knows his subject. Get the lycanthropy under control, and I'd say you couldn't have a better Defence teacher." She paused, turning to Severus. "Albus has got the lycanthropy under control, hasn't he?"

Severus nodded bitterly. "Oh yes. And guess who's in charge of that particular job? That's right. Not only do I have to put up with having him around school, I've got to make his bloody Wolfsbane potion, so he doesn't end up ripping someone's entrails out. Aren't I going to have a fun year?" he snarled.

"At least it isn't Lockhart," Caitlin pointed out. "It could be worse."

"Lockhart," snapped Severus, "never used to be a friend of mine, did he? Lockhart I could dismiss. Lockhart never used to light up a room as soon as he walked in. I never used to rush into the Great Hall and start scanning the Gryffindor benches for Lockhart, did I?"

"Yes you did," Caitlin countered. "Admittedly you were trying to avoid him, but that's not the point."

"Caitlin," sighed Severus, "that wasn't the same and you know it. Lupin and I... we were close. He was one of the few people back then who ever really knew me. And that's why I don't want him around me now!"

Caitlin nodded in understanding. "I get it. Only the ones who get close to you can ever hurt you. Remus can get past your defences, and you don't like it, do you?"

"No I bloody don't!" Severus snapped, hugging himself. "I don't like it in the slightest."

"Of course not, love; who would?" soothed Caitlin. Before changing her demeanour from gentle to harsh in an instant. "Which is why I'm telling you this: get over it. Confront your demons. Examine your issues, hug the monster, face the Dweller on the Threshold, do what you have to. But Get Over It." She emphasised every word, making sure both Melissa and Severus got the point.

"But Cait..." Melissa began. Caitlin cut her off.

"No, don't Cait me. I'm telling you both to put aside your petty grievances and Grow Up!" she snapped. "Honestly, you think I don't know what it's like to have to work with someone who hurt me in the past? To have a past love teaching my daughter when I really don't want him anywhere near her? Five years ago, I didn't want you teaching at Hogwarts either!" she said to Severus, rather pointedly. "And as for co-operating with you over Luella, well..." Here she addressed Melissa. "I seem to remember protesting over that too. Did I get any sympathy from you? No, I did not. I got told to get over it and get on with it. So I did. And now I can't think of anyone I'd rather work

with." She looked at them both, arms folded. "If I managed it with someone who'd once tortured me, I'm sure you two can manage it with someone who just didn't want you to hate him!"

Both Severus and Melissa looked away, Severus squirming on the spot and Melissa blushing a deep shade of crimson. Caitlin surveyed them both, satisfied with herself.

"Honestly, you three were good friends once," she said, offhand. "If this forces you to put your differences aside and lose this petty grudge once and for all, it will all have been worth it." She leaned back, sighing. "Looks like Albus may have been right."

This got their attention.

"What," said Severus, danger in his eyes.

"You knew?" squealed Melissa in outrage. "Caitlin, why didn't you tell us??"

"Didn't know he'd accepted until now," Caitlin replied. "Only a few days ago, Albus was worried Remus was going to say no."

"You and Albus... discussed this?" said Severus, just about managing to rein in his temper. "And you didn't try and talk him out of it?"

"Hardly," replied Caitlin, suppressing a smile. "It was me who suggested hiring him in the first place."

"WHAT??" they both shrieked, Severus actually leaping to his feet in fury.

"YOU TOLD HIM TO HIRE REMUS LUPIN???" Severus roared, glaring at her. Caitlin flinched a little, until her courage rallied. Calm down, Cait. You could take him down if you needed to. Have done, before now. Taking a few deep breaths, she composed herself and met his eyes.

"Recommended him, Severus. There's a difference."

"But Caitlin, you know how we both feel about him!" Melissa cried, wringing her hands. "Why on earth him, of all people?"

"Because he was the first person I could think of, and virtually the only one not already employed by the Ministry who has experience of Dementors," Caitlin retorted. "Besides, it was the only way I could get Albus to agree to having the creatures anywhere near his school."

"I can just imagine how that conversation went," snapped Severus. "Hey Albus, bad news, we have to surround your school with Dementors all year, but hey, look on the bright side! You get to have a werewolf on site! Isn't that cool!" What was it, Caitlin, order the Dementor package and get a werewolf absolutely free down at the Dark Creatures Emporium?"

"Severus, shut up," snapped Caitlin, going scarlet. "Look, I'm not going to discuss it any more. I'm sorry that you're hurt, but these are desperate times, and we all have to work with people we'd rather not. And if it means our kids are protected from the likes of Sirius Black, then that's all that matters."

Melissa got to her feet, unconvinced but resigned to fate.

"Come on Severus, there's nothing to be gained from arguing. Let's go." She led him towards the door, shooting an icy cold glare in Caitlin's direction. Severus allowed himself to go with her, only pausing on the way out to address one last remark to his hostess.

"Just remember this, Caitlin. If any child at Hogwarts gets hurt as a result of something Remus Lupin does or fails to do, then it'll be on your conscience. Think about it, Cait." With that, he turned and followed Melissa out.

Caitlin sighed, summoning a bottle of wine and a glass from the kitchen with her wand, before proceeding to pour herself a drink.

"They'll get over it," she told herself, before pausing. "I hope."

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Meanwhile, in Deanna's bedroom, the two children were discussing what little they'd managed to glean from the conversation below.

"I can't believe that, can you?" gasped Harry, still stunned. "Our new Defence teacher used to go out with Melissa Lovegood! Oh my god! That is just so weird!"

"I'll say," said Deanna, spread out on her bed, staring at the Pearl Jam poster on her ceiling. "My godmother having an ex-boyfriend, that's just the strangest thing." She sat up, something else occurring to her. "God, Harry, how's Marlie going to react? Getting taught by her mum's ex-boyfriend. Bloody hell, Harry, how on earth am I going to break that news to her? She'll hit the roof. I know I would if one of my teachers had had an affair with my mum."

"Don't," Harry replied simply. "She doesn't need to know, and it's not likely she'll find out, is it?"

"Not tell her?" Deanna blinked. "But... but I can't not tell her! It'd be dishonest! It'd be like lying to her. Harry, I'm her friend, it'd be wrong."

"No it wouldn't," Harry pointed out. "Not if you're protecting her from knowing something she's better off not knowing."

"I know, but..." Deanna wrung her hands, torn in two. "Suppose she guesses? If the topic comes up in conversation, and I can't hide my feelings. That necklace of hers clues her in to everything!"

Harry rolled his eyes. "And how likely is either her mum's love life or that of any of her teachers to come up? I doubt it very much, don't you? Anyway, if you can't even manage a decent facade, you're not worthy of the name Slytherin."

"Don't start," Deanna warned him. "Gods, but you're starting to sound like one of us these days. Quite frightening. Gods know how Ron and Hermione are going to react. Hey, that's a thought." She looked at him meaningfully, driving the point home as forcefully as she could manage. "If I can't tell anyone else about this, then that goes doubly for you. Not a word to anyone outside this room, especially not Hermione and Ron. It's got nothing to do with them, and if Marlie doesn't need to know, they certainly don't."

"As if I would," Harry protested. "No, don't worry, they won't hear it from me. It won't go outside this house." He began to smile. "But we are allowed to pester your mum until we find out all the gory details, aren't we?"

Deanna smiled craftily back at him. "Now that, my dear Harry, is another proposition entirely. We'll ask her tomorrow. See what she'll tell us."

"Sounds like a plan," Harry nodded. And talking of picking Caitlin's brains... "Deanna, how long has your mum known Professor Snape? Because the way they were talking seems to indicate that they're friends."

"Yeah, they've known each other since school," Deanna said offhandedly. "They were in Slytherin together. I think it was one of those love-hate things where they were always bickering but liked each other really. Not much has changed since."

"Great, that's all I need," Harry groaned. "The first adult to take an active interest in my wellbeing and get me away from the Dursleys as something other than a guest, and she's a friend of Snape's! That is so typical! Just my luck. He doesn't visit often, does he?"

"No, don't worry, you're safe," Deanna reassured him with a laugh. "We don't see much of him. Not that he'd be too horrible to you if he did. Mum would never stand for it."

"And as soon as her back was turned, then what?" Harry demanded, being only too well acquainted with what went on behind closed doors.

"He'd have to deal with me," Deanna replied promptly. "Don't worry. You've got two determined Tyler women looking out for you!" She leaned over and patted him on the shoulder. "He doesn't stand a chance."

"I just hope you're right," Harry sighed. And it was then that the Knut dropped as certain facts began to come together. Caitlin and Snape had been schoolfriends, were around the same age. And then came the words of Professor Quirrell, spoken two years ago during Harry's first battle against Voldemort, well, first that he could remember anyway. "He was at Hogwarts with your father, didn't you know?"

"Deanna," Harry began, "did Caitlin know my parents?"

Deanna lifted her eyes up, thoughtful. She was remembering the grief that always appeared in her mother's eyes whenever she'd mentioned Harry, the tears of joy she'd seen when Harry had first come to stay. The way Caitlin treated Harry as the son she'd never had. And the visceral hatred she felt for the Dursleys went far, far beyond a distaste for their mage-phobia.

"Know what, Harry?" she said finally. "I think she just might."

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The next morning, Harry was more determined than ever to find out if it was true. Had she really known his parents? Were they close? What

had they been like as people? To think that Caitlin Tyler might actually be able to tell him. He just hoped Deanna was right.

"So," Deanna began, getting straight to the point. "What was last night's little gathering about then? What was so important you had to send us upstairs?"

"Nothing that concerns you," Caitlin replied, engrossed in a copy of Soldier of Fortune. "They just wanted to talk about an old friend, that's all."

"An old friend who happens to be teaching us Defence Against the Dark Arts this year," Deanna observed. "Mum, I'd say that's got quite a bit to do with us, don't you think?"

This time, Caitlin did look up. "Not really, Deanna. He's a teacher after all, and I hardly think it's appropriate for the two of you to know all about his private life, is it?" she remarked, before returning to her reading.

"Not even when he used to date one of my friends' mothers?" Deanna asked slyly. That got Caitlin's attention. She slammed down the magazine, turning to glare at her daughter.

"Oh, so you heard that bit then."

"Kind of hard to miss it, the way Auntie Mel was shrieking about it," Deanna commented. "What did the poor guy do, Mum, sleep with her sister or something?"

"No," Caitlin snapped. "Look, Deanna, you don't need to know the details. Let's just say it ended badly, Mel went on to marry Marlie's father and it's all ancient history. Let's leave it at that, shall we?"

Harry looked from one witch to the other, very much hoping that it wouldn't get left at that. Not only was he hoping to find out exactly why Snape and Mrs. Lovegood disliked their new teacher so much, but if this conversation got cut off, he might not get another chance to ask Caitlin about his parents. Fortunately, Deanna was nothing if not persistent.

"So if it's ancient history, why doesn't Auntie Mel want him teaching then?"

"Because," Caitlin sighed, "she'd like it to stay that way, and her ex-boyfriend being around her kids isn't going to help things, is it? Now, I'm not saying any more on the subject, so will you please stop asking me? Also, I trust that you're not going to breathe a word of this to any of your friends. Particularly Marlie." Caitlin gave her daughter a very stern, no-nonsense look.

"No, Mum," Deanna promised. "I won't. Harry won't either, will you Harry?"

"No, Caitlin," Harry promised. He hesitated. Should he ask her? Now that the moment was actually here, he felt his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth, stubbornly refusing to move. But if he delayed, the chance might not come back again for a long time, if at all. Gathering his courage, he spoke up.

"Caitlin," he stammered. "I... I know you knew Snape at school, and Mrs. Lovegood, and, well, Snape knew my father at Hogwarts, and, and, I was wondering..." His voice trailed off.

"Wondering what?" asked Caitlin, faintly alarmed. It was now Deanna's turn to glance between the two of them, hanging on every word.

"I was wondering..." Harry faltered. Catching Deanna's eye, he finally bit the bullet. "Did you know my parents too?" he gasped, barely able to contain himself. As soon as the words were out, he looked down, hardly daring to look at Caitlin. What a fool she must think him. And yet, what if it were true? What then? He wanted to be right, and yet he wasn't sure he wanted to hear what she could tell him.

Which is why he missed the expression on her face as he asked the question, as Caitlin Tyler froze, looking absolutely stunned, almost as if she were about to cry, and yet with a hint of joy underneath it all.

The seconds ticked by, each one a mini-eternity. And then, Caitlin shattered the tension with a word.

"Yes," she finally whispered. "Yes I knew them."

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Harry looked up, hardly able to believe what he was hearing. He was right, she **had** known them!

"You... you did?" he breathed. "Cool! I mean... how well did you know them? What were they like? Were they friends of yours? Can you tell me? Can you tell me everything?"

Caitlin raised a hand, trying to get a word in edgewise. "Harry, I'd love to. I'll show you too, I must have tons of photos."

"Can I see them?" Harry asked, scarcely able to comprehend that here was a friendly adult who had known his parents personally, as equals, and was willing and able to tell him about them.

"Sure," Caitlin said tenderly, indicating for him to follow her into the front room. It was at this point that Deanna coughed and made her excuses.

"Er, I think I have a Divination assignment to finish, so if you don't mind, I might make myself scarce..." Clearing her empty breakfast bowl into the sink, she got up and left.

Tapping her wand on the table, Caitlin sent the rest of the breakfast things after it, where they started washing themselves up, before leading Harry into the more comfortable surroundings of the Tylers' living room.

"Well, Harry," she said when they'd both settled down. "Where do you want me to start?"

"Oh, I don't know," sighed Harry, impatient. "How'd you first get to know them? Were you in Gryffindor too?"

"Um, no," Caitlin admitted. "Slytherin, me, although it was a very close run thing. In fact, had it not been for your mother, it could have been Gryffindor."

"Yeah, Slytherin, suppose you would have been," said Harry, realising that members of the same family usually ended up in the same house, and that if Deanna was Slytherin, chances were her mother had been too. "So, er, how'd my mum keep you out of Gryffindor then?"

"Easy, really," Caitlin smiled. "She was an Evans, I was a Tyler. She got Sorted before me. Sorting Hat told me I was certainly calculating enough to make a good Slytherin, but that my fiery nature was surely more suited to Gryffindor, and I told it that if I wasn't with my best mate, it'd be the one finding out all about fiery natures. Literally." Caitlin couldn't help smirking at the memory. "Needless to say, it saw reason and put me in Slytherin."

Harry blinked, the implications slowly dawning on him. "Hold on. My mum was Slytherin?"

"Yeah, why... oh." Caitlin cursed herself for not having mentioned that sooner. "No one ever told you, did they?"

Harry shook his head. "No. I mean, I always thought my parents were Gryffindors."

"Oh your father was," Caitlin told him. "One of the best Quidditch players they ever had, damn him."

Harry felt his mouth hang open, shocked to hear Caitlin being so negative. "Didn't you like him?" he asked.

"Oh I liked him as a person," Caitlin reassured him. "Just not when I was trying to get the Quaffle off him at a hundred feet. He was entirely too good at the game. Oh for the days when Gryffindor espoused the 'naturally talented amateur' philosophy!" she sighed.

"You played Quidditch too?" Harry asked, suddenly interested. "What position?"

"Chaser. I was good too," Caitlin purred. "Had to be, I had Lucius Malfoy standing in my way. I had to fight him for a place on the team."

"What, literally?" asked Harry, wanting to hear more about this. "And you won?"

"Well, we didn't exactly fight physically," Caitlin said. "He was bigger than me, and besides, that isn't the Slytherin way of doing things. We used every strategy possible to try and undermine each other, until a freak broomstick accident in his sixth year which Branwen Morgan and I had no part in whatsoever wrecked his knee and effectively ended his Quidditch ambitions."

"No part in whatsoever, eh?" Harry grinned. He knew exactly what that meant.

"I don't know what you mean, Harry," said Caitlin, a very picture of innocence. "But I am drifting off-topic, am I not? Back to your parents. Yes, James Potter was a very talented Chaser for Gryffindor, while Lily Evans was an academic genius who had enough self-confidence for every man, woman and child in Hogsmeade and then some. I think she could have ended up in Gryffindor too, but she always claimed it was a big boys' club and she wasn't interested in tagging along when she could be the one in the limelight. You should be proud of her, Harry, she was a real pioneer. One of the first Muggle-borns in Slytherin for fifty years, and certainly the first not to skulk around the sidelines hoping no one else would discover her secret. It was a standing Slytherin joke that she should have been in Gryffindor with bravery like that. Not that anyone ever said that to her face, mind," Caitlin added. "Not twice anyway."

Harry couldn't help laughing. The thought of his mother prowling around the Slytherin common room, daring all the Draco Malfoys of this world to challenge her right to be there, was an image he'd carry until his dying days. Caitlin seemed to guess what he was thinking.

"Be proud of her, Harry," she said softly. "She was an exceptional lady, the first out-and-proud Slytherin Muggleborn, and to carry that off, one has to be as brave as most Gryffindors. She even stood up to Lord Voldemort in the end, although that she didn't survive, as you know. I know it's probably a shock to know you had Slytherin relatives, but I don't want you to feel ashamed or anything, because you couldn't have had a better mother than my Lil."

"I don't," said Harry quietly. "I mean, I'm not. Ashamed of her, I mean. It's just, I nearly ended up in Slytherin. The Sorting Hat was going to put me there, it said I had all the qualities I needed to make a good one. But I wasn't sure, I'd heard from Ron and Hagrid that Slytherin had a lot of dark wizards, and I didn't want to go there. So I got put in Gryffindor instead." He looked up at her, uncertain. "Should I have gone to Slytherin, do you think? I mean, my mum being one and all."

"Maybe," Caitlin conceded. "But then again, your father was in Gryffindor too. With parents from both houses, you've got the nature of both within you. It's up to you which one you use at any one time. Sometimes you might need to be a Gryffindor, other times you may find you need to be a Slyth. Unlike many others, you've got that freedom to choose. So you chose Gryffindor back then. Big deal. Maybe you were more at home with your Gryffindor side back then. Doesn't mean you have to disown your Slytherin side totally. Never mind where you 'should' have been. Gryffindor felt right to you at the time. That's all that matters."

"Guess you're right," Harry said thoughtfully. "So, Caitlin. Given that you knew them all back then, can you tell me something?"

"Tell you what?" asked Caitlin lightly.

"Why did Professor Snape hate my parents?"

Caitlin groaned mentally. It would have to be that one. "A difficult question to answer, Harry. However, I feel I should tell you that he didn't loathe both of them, at least not initially."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, perplexed.

Caitlin braced herself. This could be interesting. "What I mean is that, as a Slytherin, he couldn't help but notice your mother. And he couldn't help but be fascinated by her. For her part, she rather took a shine to him too. He didn't look like he does now, by the way. Back then, he had hair like a raven's feathers, really soft and shiny, and his teeth and skin were better cared for too. He was quite a striking man, believe it or

not," Caitlin smiled. "Anyway, he was the only male in Slytherin with enough balls to be a match for her, and they ended up dating. Sorry, Harry, but you had to know sooner or later."

Harry had gone a faint shade of green and looked as if he were about to be sick. "Snape... and my mum? Arrggh! That's horrible! Gods, I think I'm going to be ill."

"If it's any consolation, it didn't last," Caitlin tried to reassure him. "He was far too jealous and controlling, and she wasn't the type to go all girly and give in easily. They were always fighting, and making up, and fighting and making up. In the end, Lil got sick of it and finished things entirely, preferring a rather easier time of it with your dad. And that was when love turned to hate, and he realised he couldn't stand the sight of either of them. And that, Harry, is the real reason why he can't stand you either. You're the living, breathing reminder of all that." Caitlin paused. "That and the fact that you're famous for just sitting there and having a curse flung at you."

"Hey, I didn't ask to be famous!" Harry snapped. "I'd trade it all in a second to get my mum and dad back!"

"You know that and I know that," said Caitlin softly. "But Severus would have happily traded his entire family for anything like the recognition you've got."

"Well then, he's a selfish idiot," said Harry furiously.

"You never met his family."

"They couldn't have been any worse than the Dursleys," said Harry, wiping away a tear, determined not to cry.

"Oh they never made him sleep in a cupboard, I grant you," said Caitlin candidly. "But there's other ways of abusing a child. Subtler ways." She let that sink in, leaning back and letting Harry think it over for a bit. Which he did. However, he wasn't drawing the conclusions she really wanted him to. When he looked up again, it was anger, not tears, glimmering in his eyes, and he had gone deathly pale and still.

"You knew they made me sleep in a cupboard."

Oh gods. Now this was going to take some explaining.

"Harry, I'm sorry, if you'll just let me explain..."

"You knew how they treated me?" Harry yelled, leaping to his feet. "You knew, and you never did anything? You just let me suffer? I was the son of your best friend, and you just let them treat me like I was subhuman?"

Caitlin reached out, trying to comfort him, but he just pushed her away. "How?" he screamed. "How could you?? How could you just stand there and watch them abuse an innocent kid? You're an Auror, you've got Ministry contacts, you've got power! You're not seriously telling me you couldn't get a bunch of Muggles to do what you want?"

"It's not that simple!" Caitlin cried.

"Why? Why isn't it that simple?" raged Harry. "Tell me why you couldn't have walked in there like you did a few weeks ago, just walked in there and told them to stop it or else! Just tell me why!" The tears which had been threatening to come for a while were now flowing in earnest. "Tell me why!" he sobbed.

Stepping forward, Caitlin reached out and put her arms around the boy, soothing him gently.

"I tried," she said softly. "I tried every avenue I knew of to get you out of there. But there was no legal means of doing anything. Believe me, Harry, I wanted to make them suffer so much. But I couldn't do anything. Harming a Muggle is strictly prohibited except in self-defence, and they were your legal guardians. There was nothing I could do. Harry, I'm so sorry, I really am."

Harry's sobs subsided as he relaxed into her arms. However, although his anger had ebbed, the distress wasn't going away in a hurry.

"Why'd I have to go to them, Caitlin?" Harry whispered. "Why them? Mum and Dad must have known what they were like, why did they let me go there? There was a war going on, they must have known they could be killed at any time, surely they made a will."

"They did," said Caitlin, near to tears herself now as rage and impotence began blocking her throat. "My mother was one of the witnesses. I saw it with my own eyes. But when Voldemort attacked, the house we were all living in was destroyed, and the will was never found. Which meant they effectively died intestate, and their affairs had to be dealt with according to magical law. The Gringotts vaults were safe enough - as their surviving heir, they went automatically to you and remained untouchable until you were old enough to claim it. However, if there was no will, then by law, you had to go to your closest living blood relatives. And Petunia Dursley was the only one you had left."

"Was there nothing you could have done?" Harry asked, shaking.

"By the time I was in any fit state to do anything, it was too late," said Caitlin, blinking back the tears. "You were already gone, it was all official and the appeals deadline was past. It was too late. All I could do was move near you and keep an eye on you, make sure they never overstepped the mark."

"And did you?" asked Harry. They were both seated again now, with Harry nestled snugly up against Caitlin.

"Once or twice," Caitlin purred. "Remember when you first got your Hogwarts letter?"

"I remember." The Dursleys had taken one look and destroyed it. At least, until some more had arrived. Those had been destroyed too, and each time, more had arrived to take their place until the Dursleys had been forced to flee their home under the weight of all the letters. Even then they hadn't been safe. The letters had followed them, right out into the middle of nowhere, until finally, on the eve of Harry's eleventh birthday, Hagrid had arrived to deliver a letter in person.

"Well, normal procedure on not getting a response is to send a teacher to visit in person," Caitlin grinned. "That usually sorts it out. And if that doesn't work, we send in the big guns."

"What's that? The Ministry?" Harry asked.

"No. We send Severus."

Harry privately thought that anxious Muggle parents would be even less reassured about the magical world after a visit from Professor Snape. However, he kept his thoughts to himself.

"So, how was it I got a deluge of letters stalking me then?"

Caitlin merely smiled. "Lots of Multiplication Charms, the latest in Apporting techniques, and a Scryscope borrowed from work. That's how."

Harry's eyes widened. "That was you?" "It was," Caitlin admitted. "I mean, I could have just left it to the official channels... but where's the fun in that?"

Harry dissolved into laughter, all previous emotion forgotten. "Oh my god, Caitlin! You are unbelievable!" He dried his eyes, gazing at her. "Thank you."

"It was nothing," she replied modestly. "What you really want to be thanking me for is the owl to Albus Dumbledore informing him of the situation and requesting that he send Hagrid over to you."

"Didn't he already know?" Harry asked. For some reason, the idea of Dumbledore not knowing exactly what was going on seemed deeply unsettling.

Caitlin shrugged. "Probably. But I daresay he likes to be told."

"Do you think he knows what the Dursleys are like?" Harry asked, sombre once more.

"Maybe."

"If I told him... do you think he could get me out of there permanently?" he asked, clutching at a straw of hope.

Caitlin shook her head. "Doubtful. Even Dumbledore can't get his way all the time." However, she allowed herself a small smile. "You never know though. After all, if this Sirius Black situation continues, you might have to stay here indefinitely."

Harry grinned. "Cool! That'd be great."

"It would, Harry," Caitlin whispered. "It certainly would."

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Deanna was waiting outside in the back garden for Harry and her mother to finish. It was a nice day, and she was determined to make the most of the sunshine, escaped convict or no escaped convict. So she'd taken some books out with her and was reading up on various combat techniques. You could never be too careful.

She was also enjoying the company of a stray dog that had been hanging around in the alley that ran past their house; a big, black dog

with masses of shaggy fur who would have looked terrifying if he hadn't been sitting there with his tongue hanging out and tail wagging. Always a soft touch where cute, furry animals were concerned, Deanna had lifted the security charms a little and let him in via the back gate. A few flea-banishing charms later, and the dog was now curled around her with his head in her lap. It made for a rather touching tableau.

"You alright there, boy?" Deanna murmured, scratching the dog behind his ears. The dog whimpered happily and nuzzled up against her.

"That's good," Deanna grinned. She felt the fur on his neck and noted that the dog had no collar. "All on your own, are you, eh? That's a shame, I'm amazed a cutie like you's got no one to look after you."

The dog seemed to agree with that one, thumping its tail against the ground.

"Wish I could look after you," Deanna said softly, giving the dog a cuddle. "Be nice, having a dog. Specially one as gorgeous as you." She rubbed the dog's back, smiling as he whinnied appreciatively. "Wish I had a pet I could cuddle."

The back door opened. The dog was on his feet in seconds, ears pricked, fur on end, ready to bolt. Deanna looked up, alarmed. However, on seeing it was only Harry, she relaxed.

Funnily enough, so did the dog. As soon as he saw the boy, he bounded over to him, nearly knocking Harry over in the process.

"It's you!" Harry cried, recognising the dog at once as the one that he'd encountered on the night he ran away. Flinging his arms around it, he fell to the ground as the dog pounced on him, barking with delight and generally leaping around like he was possessed.

"Friend of yours, Harry?" Deanna raised an eyebrow.

Harry hauled himself to his feet, trying to ignore the overexcited canine bounding around him.

"Kinda. He was there the first night I came here, hanging around outside, and I've seen him once or twice since. How'd you get him inside, he always seemed too shy to come any closer before."

The two teenagers were now sitting underneath the apple tree that grew in the Tylers' back garden, with the dog curled at their feet, lying on his back with his feet in the air looking remarkably silly. Deanna was tickling his stomach affectionately.

"Stupid mutt," she murmured with a smile. "Hard to believe his ancestors were wolves, isn't it?"

"Great dog, though," said Harry, enthralled. "Wish I'd had him as a pet."

"He certainly seems to like you," Deanna agreed. "He's been here before, you say?"

"Yeah, hangs round here a lot. First time he's ever come in the garden properly though. How'd you do it?"

Deanna flexed her wand. "Lifted the security charms, opened the gate, invited him in and he walked right through. Easy. Oh, and the fact I had half a bacon sandwich in my hand from breakfast didn't hurt either."

"Might have known he'd come in for food," Harry laughed. "Reckon your mum'll let us keep him?"

"Maybe," Deanna answered, but she found herself cut short as the dog froze, before rolling back on to his feet and starting to pad away.

"Hey!" cried Deanna. "Come back! I was enjoying that!" The dog turned and looked at her, whining softly with a sad, longing look in his eyes. However, he didn't go to her. Instead, he turned and walked to the back gate, before leaping up on his hind legs, pushing the latch and slipping out into the alleyway. Deanna jumped and ran after him, peering out, trying to work out where he'd gone. No sign of him. It was

as if the dog had vanished into thin air. Frowning, she closed and locked the gate, and re-strengthened the charms.

"Vanished," she announced, puzzled. "Just disappeared!"

Harry nodded, sagely. "Yeah, he does that a lot. He'll be sat there cuddling up to you one minute then darting off the next. Don't know how he does it."

"Very strange," said Deanna. "Especially the way he'd just gone; I mean, there was no time for him to have reached the street or anything. It's like he was some kind of fairy dog, a Grim or a Black Shuck or a Padfoot or something like that."

"Didn't know Surrey had any fairy dogs," said Harry.

"It doesn't," Deanna replied. "They prefer remote regions like the Pennines and East Anglia, places like that. And they're meant to be big and frightening harbingers of death, not soppy mutts that curl up at your feet and let you tickle their stomach."

"How do you know all this?" Harry asked, intrigued. "I never had you down as the academic type."

"I'm not. Not really," Deanna replied. "But what I'm interested in, I can't get enough of. And dark creatures are what I'm interested in."

"Really?" Harry asked dryly. "I should show you that book Hagrid sent me for my birthday. The Monster Book of Monsters - heard of it?"

Deanna's face showed that she had heard of it only too well. "Gods, yeah. It's on my reading list. Mum ordered it from Flourish and Blotts'

delivery service, and you should have seen the trouble we had with it. None of the owls would carry it for a start, so we had to send Nestra to get it, then when it arrived, the bloody thing nearly bit my head off!" Deanna scowled at the memory. "Tell you what, Harry, this does not bode well for my Care of Magical Creatures course if even the textbook's likely to kill you."

"Where's your copy at the moment?" Harry asked.

"In my trunk. Mum hit it with a Stunning Charm, and we've been keeping it under sedation since. So if you hear me screaming and yelling 'Stupefy!' in the middle of the night, you know why."

"Still can't believe your mum lets us carry our wands with us," said Harry. "Is she trusting or what?"

"Nah," said Deanna. "She just doesn't want us unarmed in case Sirius Black attacks while she's not there."

"He's really got to her, hasn't he," said Harry softly.

"Too right he has," said Deanna. "Did you know she's not taking us to Diagon Alley this year? She's ordering our books and other stuff via mail order, so if you need anything, better let her know."

"New robes," replied Harry. "Mine are getting too short. Be interesting to see how she's going to manage that one."

"Oh dear," Deanna smirked. "Off the rack robes for you this year, then."

"Stop it, you." Harry gave her a playful shove. Then his face fell as something occurred to him. "Oh! If we're not going to Diagon Alley, when am I going to see Ron and Hermione? I was hoping to meet up before school starts again."

"Invite them over here," Deanna suggested. "I'm sure Mum won't mind having them around. Ron can get the Floo direct, and Hermione only lives in Hampstead anyway, she can get the train down here. Won't take her more than an hour or two at most. And besides, Luella gets back in three days time. Won't that be nice?"

Harry went pink on hearing this. "Er, um, yes, yes it will, I guess."

Deanna burst out laughing. "Rather coy, aren't we? C'mon, Potter, you've been looking forward to seeing her again for weeks, admit it."

Harry mumbled something incoherent under his breath, causing Deanna to laugh all the more.

"Gods, Harry, you're so transparent. You have got it bad, haven't you?"

"Have not!" Harry protested.

"Have too!"

"Haven't!"

"Oh yes, you have!"

"Oh no I haven't!"

"Have, have, have!"

"Have not! Tyler, stop it!"

"Make me."

"OK then, you asked for it." With that, Harry pounced on her and the fight began in earnest as the two of them started wrestling each other in a mock-battle which quickly degenerated into a tickling match, resulting in loud shouts and screams. The fight went on until lunch when Caitlin finally arrived to break it up, and the original argument never was resolved, but when the dust had settled, both were agreed - it would be nice to see Luella again.

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Chapter Five Fateful Attractions

Finally, the summer came to an end, and 1st September came upon them once more. All of Harry and Deanna's books had arrived via mail order, as well as new stationery and Potions supplies, and Madam Malkin had visited in person to measure Harry and Deanna for their new robes. And now the new term was upon them, and the Tyler household was in its usual orderly state.

"Mum! MUM! Have you seen my Walkmage?" Deanna yelled from her bedroom.

"How on earth would I know, you've barely used it since you got back!" Caitlin snapped back as she bustled in with more of Deanna's schoolrobes. "Never mind that, have you got the important things? Money, bath stuff, books?"

"Yeah, yeah, it's all in here," Deanna said, taking the laundry off her mother and forcing it in. "Look, don't worry, I'll be fine. Have I ever forgotten anything before?"

Caitlin opened her mouth, ready to leap in with the time Deanna had forgotten her cauldron in her second year, her dragon hide gloves in her third, and half her booklist last year (although to be fair, most of them had been Lockhart books). However, Deanna remembered in time and leapt in first.

"Actually, don't answer that. When's this Ministry car coming?"

"Ten o'clock. Make sure you're ready on time, please, they won't wait forever. Now, I'm going to see how Harry's doing," Caitlin started, but found herself interrupted as Deanna's Monster Book woke up and started snapping.

"Shut UP!" Deanna yelled, knocking it out with her cauldron. "Honestly, bloody thing, it had better be useful after all this."

"Incarcero," Caitlin smiled, waving her wand. She watched in satisfaction as chains flew out from her wand and wrapped themselves securely around the book. "That should hold it," she said calmly as she went to check on Harry.

Harry, meanwhile, proved to have already packed everything, and was sitting patiently on his bed, trunk and Nimbus at his feet, caged Hedwig on his lap, all his worldly goods stowed in a single large wooden box. Caitlin felt her heart go out to him. He looked so forlorn, especially now that the room had been stripped of any sign that anyone had ever occupied it.

"You alright, Harry?" she asked gently, sitting next to him.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine," he said softly. "When are we off?"

"Car's coming for us at ten. Harry, are you alright?" Caitlin asked, concerned.

"Yeah. It's just that," Harry gestured at the empty room, "I might not be coming back here again, and I just realised how much I'm going to miss this place." He looked around, a lump in his throat. Caitlin put her arms round him, feeling her own heart

sink too. For weeks now, he'd been living with her as her foster-son, like he should have done from the start, and she'd grown used to having him around. It was going to be strange without him, and truth be

told, she didn't want him to go, certainly not back to the Dursleys anyway.

"Oh, Harry," she said tenderly. "It'll be OK. You won't have to go back to the Dursleys until next summer at the earliest. And who knows, maybe not even then if the Ministry don't think it's safe."

"You couldn't pull a few strings, could you?" Harry asked hopefully. "You know, state that in your professional opinion, it's far too dangerous for me to live with Muggles?"

"Maybe," Caitlin laughed. "I don't guarantee anything, but I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks," Harry whispered, squeezing her arm in gratitude. Then a thought occurred to him. "Actually, Caitlin, there is something you can do for me now."

"Oh yes?" Caitlin raised an eyebrow. "And what might that be?"

Harry reached into his pocket and unfurled a rather crumpled piece of paper. "It's my Hogsmeade form. I never got Uncle Vernon to sign it before I left. Is there any way you could...?" His voice trailed off under the look in Caitlin's eyes. While she didn't exactly look forbidding, she didn't look happy either.

"I'm afraid not, Harry," Caitlin said quietly. "I'm not your legal guardian. Anyway," she added, seeing the disappointment on Harry's face, "it's not safe. Sirius Black is still at large, he could attack at any time. I really don't think it's a good idea for you to leave the school, not until he's caught and safely put away." She carefully eased the form out of Harry's grip and pocketed it. "But I'll tell you what. I'll hang on to it, and if we catch him before the end of the year, I'll take it round to the Dursleys myself, and make them sign it. How's that?"

Harry sighed, hanging his head. Still, it was better than nothing, and at least if they caught Sirius Black he'd be able to go to Hogsmeade for part of the year.

"OK," he sighed. "Suppose it'll have to do."

"Never mind, Harry," Deanna's voice came from the doorway. She'd obviously overheard the conversation. "I'll see if I can't get some

souvenirs for you, let you see what you're missing." She was leaning against the door, grin in place. But not for long.

"You will not," said Caitlin firmly. "You're not going either."

"What??" Deanna shrieked, horrified.

"I've written to Dumbledore and told him I've revoked your permission to leave the campus," Caitlin replied, not to be dissuaded. "Like I said to Harry, it's far too dangerous. Until he's caught, you're staying at the school where you'll be safe."

"But, Mum..." Deanna whined.

"No buts, Deanna," Caitlin snapped. "You're not going and that is final."

"Marlie's still going," Deanna threw at her. "How come she can go and I can't?"

Caitlin seemed a little put off by this, lost for words.

"That's not the same," she said, eventually.

"Yes it is!" Deanna fumed. "Her mum's an Auror too, she could be in danger as much as I am. How come Auntie Mel's letting her go, and you won't let me?"

"You wouldn't understand, Deanna," Caitlin sighed wearily.

"Try me," her daughter challenged her.

Harry glanced around the room, wondering if there was any way he could get out of there without arousing suspicion. The last thing he

wanted was to get caught up in an argument. Fortunately for him, the doorbell rang at that moment.

"Shall I get that?" he asked, springing to his feet. Caitlin grabbed him by the arm and told him to sit down.

"Deanna, go and answer that," Caitlin said. "It's probably Luella - I told her parents I'd take her seeing as we had a car booked."

"Fine," Deanna snapped. "But don't think you've heard the last of this!" She turned and flounced out, leaving Caitlin alone with Harry.

"Will she-?" Harry began.

"Yes, she'll be fine," said Caitlin, looking drained. "She'll get used to the idea. Listen, Harry, before you go, there's something I need to tell you."

"What's that?" asked Harry.

"I want you to promise me something."

"What is it?"

"Promise me that whatever happens, you won't go looking for trouble," Caitlin urged. Harry looked at her oddly. He usually didn't need to, it usually found him soon enough.

"What do you mean, Caitlin?" he asked, confused.

"What I mean is..." Caitlin gestured helplessly, seemingly at a loss for words. "Just that you might find out things you won't like, things that might upset you, and I want

to make sure that you won't go off and do anything reckless that might get you killed. Not this year, not with Black around. Promise me, Harry!"

"I..." Harry couldn't think what to say, it wasn't as if he'd voluntarily get himself in danger. Only if someone he cared about was in trouble. He glanced towards the door, where footsteps were coming up the stairs, and teenage girl voices could be heard. One teenage girl voice in particular could be heard loudly complaining about how unfair parents could be.

"Promise me!" Caitlin hissed, also having heard, and aware that they didn't have much time.

"OK, I promise," said Harry. He was still confused, but he didn't see much point in saying no. It wasn't a particularly difficult promise to keep after all.

Caitlin smiled, squeezing his hand. "Thanks." She turned as Deanna and Luella entered. "And welcome back, Luella!"

Luella Martin smiled back, suntanned, happy and healthy. "Nice to see you again, Caitlin," she laughed, before noticing Harry, who had gone bright pink and mysteriously lost the ability to string a coherent sentence together. "Hi, Harry! Deanna told me you'd moved in. How's it been? Deanna driven you mad yet?"

Harry could only nod wordlessly. Deanna snickered, giving Harry a knowing look.

"Don't mind him, Lu, he's always like that around girls," she laughed. "Come on, come and help me with my stuff." She led Luella into her own room, and the routine of packing started up once more.

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An hour and a half later, and Platform Nine and Three-Quarters was packed with black-clad students and their parents, much as it usually was at the start of the school year. Almost. There was a pall of tension hanging over the scene that hadn't been there in previous years, a sense that something could happen at any minute, that the distance between normality and horror was but a step. That the uneasiness could shatter at any minute.

"DEANNA!"

The shriek rent the air, causing not a few people to leap out of their skins with fright. Near the screamer, Neville Longbottom squeaked in terror as Trevor leapt out of his arms, causing his grandmother to start scolding him as he raced after the hapless amphibian.

"Dear gods, what was that?" Narcissa Malfoy gasped, clutching her heart. She hadn't been standing as near as the Longbottoms, but she did have her back to the source, and Black's escape had had even her on edge lately.

Draco, however, had seen it perfectly.

"Calm down, Mother. It's just Marlie being girly and hysterical. Annoying but hardly fatal," he drawled.

"Marlie?" Narcissa turned on the spot, regaining her composure immediately. "Where?" Her eyes lighted on her niece, who was racing down the platform, robes flying, tresses flowing, to where the Tylers had just entered. Something in Narcissa's features softened at once, as she started to smile. However, her eyes spoke of other emotions entirely. Emotions of longing... and loss.

"She's something, isn't she?" Narcissa said softly. "Reckon she'll do it?"

"Do what?" Draco asked. "Animagism? Hardly, even those books of yours won't help her. You have to be really powerful and knowledgeable to manage that. Mother, I had a look at those books,

and I couldn't understand a word. How's my ditzy little cousin going to cope- ow!"

Narcissa had dealt her son a sharp smack around the head.

"Don't talk that way about your cousin, Draco," she said tersely. "As a matter of fact, I was talking about getting her place on the Quidditch team back. Does she have any chance at all?"

"On sheer talent, absolutely," Draco told her. That much was true, anyhow. However, as was frequently the case where Slytherin was concerned, there was rather more to it than that.

"I didn't ask about talent, Draco," Narcissa's voice was positively saturated with venom. "I asked about her chances."

"Mother," Draco sighed. They'd had this discussion many times over the summer, and he'd hoped his mother would have let it go by now. Alas, it seemed not to be. "You know that I'd have to leave before Flint picked her. He's not likely to kick me off unless I do really badly, and before you ask, no I am not throwing games just so he'll substitute me for Marls. I have my pride." Draco straightened his robes, shaking his hair back.

"Resign?" Narcissa suggested. Draco shook his head, horrified.

"Resign?" he echoed. "I can't do that! After Father spent all that money on buying brooms? Mother, he'd kill me. I'd never be able to set foot in the house again."

"Well then, you'll have to be cunning about it, won't you?" Narcissa snapped. "Come on, Draco," she coaxed, placing an arm around her son's shoulders, charming smile in place. "You're a Slytherin after all, I'm sure a clever boy like you can think of a way of helping your cousin out. What do you say, Draco? Hmm?"

Draco was saved from having to respond by the arrival of his father, stalking across the platform with his cloak flapping behind him, terrifying a few nearby first years. The hand that wasn't clutching his trademark snake cane was carrying a tray of

Muggle coffee cups. While Lucius officially despised all things Muggle, nothing would make him give up cappuccinos in a hurry.

"Is everything all right over here?" Lucius asked, passing a cafe latte to his wife and rather disdainfully holding a can of Coke in his son's direction, barely touching the rim with his fingertips. "I heard screaming, but unless Sirius Black's had an unfortunate accident regarding his, er, gentlemen's equipment, can I safely assume it was nothing more than a teenage girl in the grip of hormones?"

Narcissa's posture shifted in an instant, assuming the haughty demeanour that the rest of the world usually saw.

"My sister's half-blood brat," she sniffed. "Gods, but has Melissa taught her any manners?"

"Doubtless it's the fault of that Muggle she married," Lucius replied, putting an arm around his wife. "No standards, any of them. The disrespect they show to their parents, it is truly a wonder their families hold together at all."

"I'm told their divorce rate's shocking," Draco volunteered, hoping that his father wouldn't think to ask what mother and son had been talking about.

"Doesn't surprise me," Lucius remarked. "The way they demystify everything, it's no wonder marriage has lost its potency." Trailing a finger through Narcissa's hair, he idly hooked it behind her ear, smiling rather nostalgically at her. "The fools don't know what they've lost," he murmured.

Narcissa purred in response, nestling close to her husband and rubbing her nose against his. Draco watched in horror as his parents started giggling. He had to break this up before his friends saw them.

"Right, let's go," he barked, reaching for his trunk. "Train'll be leaving any minute, and I don't want to miss it. Come on!" he urged.

Lucius reluctantly let go of Narcissa, a knowing grin on his face.

"Knew that'd get him moving," he murmured. Narcissa gave him a playful shove.

"And there I was thinking you cared," she pouted.

"My dear Narcissa, surely you know me better than that by now."

"Well yes, but a witch can dream, can't she?" Narcissa sighed.

"Bide your time, my love, and maybe you won't be disappointed," Lucius growled as he pulled her into an embrace. "Whole day ahead of us, house to ourselves, who knows what might happen?"

Narcissa started giggling again, at least until her son's horrified screams rent the air.

"MOTHER! FATHER!"

The two of them parted reluctantly, following their son to the train.

"Honestly, can't you leave it until you get home? For my sake?" Draco pleaded.

"It's how we all come into this world, Draco," said Narcissa impassively.

"Yes, and you've now got a child, so you can stop doing it, can't you?" Draco seethed. "I mean, it's disgusting, it really is, the sort of thing that Muggle parents do- ow!"

For the second time that day, Draco had received a blow to the head, this time delivered by Lucius with the head of his snake cane.

"Quiet, boy," he snapped. "Don't compare your mother to those filthy excuses for human beings."

"Sorry," Draco muttered.

"Accepted, Draco," said Narcissa, idly levitating her son's trunk on to the train. "Now, how about a kiss for your mother before you go?"

"Mother..." Draco moaned.

"Draco," Lucius said, looking meaningfully at the snake cane again. Groaning, Draco gave his mother a swift kiss on the cheek.

"Thank you, Draco," Narcissa smiled sweetly. "Now give your father a kiss goodbye too."

This time, the eyes of both father and son widened in horror.

"Handshake?" said Lucius gruffly, levitating his coffee and passing his cane to his freed-up left hand.

"Handshake," agreed Draco, profoundly relieved as he accepted his father's proffered right hand. "Goodbye, Father."

"Goodbye, Draco. Have a good year. Let us hope you go from strength to strength as Slytherin Seeker - it'd be nice to win the Cup properly this year, not by default like last time."

"I'll, er, I'll try," said Draco, feeling his heart sink. It was always like this, every year. Lucius had always wanted to be a professional Quidditch player, but had never been able to after injuring his knee while at Hogwarts. Which meant that Draco had found himself on a broom before he could even walk properly, expected to be the next Roderick Plumpton. Which needn't have been a problem, except his mother's niece was shaping up to be the next Eunice Murray, and for some reason, his mother, who normally couldn't stand her sister and her family, had taken a shine to her. And

Orestes thought he had problems, Draco thought. His parents had never been into Quidditch...

Meanwhile, further down the train, Harry had met up with Ron and Hermione again. Ron had already heard from his father about how Harry had been relocated, and Harry found himself bombarded with questions.

"What was that like then, staying with La Frigida Sanguinis?" Ron asked with a grin.

"La Frigida Sanguinis?" Harry asked blankly.

"Cold-Blooded One," Hermione explained with a scowl. "It's a nickname for Caitlin Tyler, but not a very nice one." She glared at Ron.

"Sorry, Hermione," sighed Ron. "Seriously though, Harry, what was it like there? Did she have you getting up at six in the morning doing press-ups? Dad reckons she's very dedicated, puts all her trainees through something like a Muggle commando course. And he says she's been training Deanna up since she was little."

"Wasn't like that with me," said Harry. Although he'd certainly seen Caitlin putting Deanna through her paces, teaching her how to swordfight and kickbox, Deanna had seemed to enjoy every minute, even complaining when Caitlin had decided that was enough for one day. However, with him, Caitlin had not only let him do pretty much whatever he liked, she'd gone out of her way to spoil him. "No, she was really nice, not at all crazy or vicious like everyone says she is. It was Deanna I had problems with."

Ron and Hermione exchanged knowing looks.

"Really?" asked Ron, feigning innocence. "You found living with a short-tempered homicidal psycho to be a problem? Can't imagine why."

"What did you do, Harry?" Hermione sighed. Deanna might have a short fuse, but she rarely attacked unprovoked.

"Nothing!" Harry protested. "It's just that when Caitlin ended training sessions, and Deanna still had energy left over, she'd immediately get hold of me and carry on where she'd left off..."

His two friends couldn't help but start sniggering, Ron openly so, Hermione having the decency to try and hide it with a hand over her mouth.

"Oh, Harry," Hermione managed weakly. "Are you alright?"

"She kicked your arse, didn't she?" Ron grinned. "Gods, wish I'd been there."

"Not always," Harry protested. "Sometimes I beat her to a draw!"

Ron and Hermione lost it totally at this point, both dissolving into laughter. Watching them, Harry felt his own self-control disintegrate as he found himself laughing right along with them.

Finally, Harry dried his eyes. Hermione had managed to regain control of herself, while Ron was clutching his side, apparently having hurt himself from laughing.

"It's good to be back, isn't it?" asked Harry, sighing with happiness. It truly was too. Staying at the Tylers' had been nice, but being with Ron and Hermione again, on the way to Hogwarts... nothing compared to that feeling. This was where he really belonged, always would be.

"Come on," he said. "Let's find a compartment."

This proved harder than they'd anticipated. It was getting late and most of the carriages were full. Finally, they reached the end of the train, with just one compartment to go.

Hermione was busy telling Ron about her attempts to find an owl that summer.

"So I tried Eeylops, and they didn't have anything suitable, not for sale anyway. All their cheaper owls were reserved for other students, you see. Lots of wizarding families wanting owls for their kids starting Hogwarts, it's their busiest time of year."

"Could have told you that myself," Ron muttered.

Hermione continued as if he'd not said a word, oblivious to the will to live sliding slowly out of her friend's eyes. "So anyway, then I tried the Magical Menagerie, and they didn't have any owls either, but they **did** have this gorgeous big marmalade cat, and I seriously thought about buying him, but then this family came in and their little girl saw it too, she was only about five or six, and she fell immediately in love with it, so I had to scrap that idea. Shame really, he'd have made a marvellous pet. Suppose it just wasn't meant to be," she sighed.

"She spends five minutes reducing me to catatonia going on and on about a pet she **nearly** bought?" Ron could be heard muttering. "Hermes help me..."

"Quiet, you two," said Harry as he approached the compartment. "I need to see if there's anyone in here." He pushed the door open. Surprisingly enough, it did actually seem to be empty... until Harry looked inside properly and saw why. Slumped in one corner, apparently fast asleep, was an adult wizard.

"Well?" Ron asked impatiently, pushing past to see what was up. "Anyone in here or not - oh." He too had caught sight of the sleeping wizard.

"Ron?" asked Hermione, peering over Harry's shoulder. She too noticed the wizard. "Oh!"

He was dressed in blue robes, which certainly looked as if they'd seen better days, being worn around the edges and darned in several places. Although he seemed fairly

young, certainly no older than Caitlin if that, his light-brown hair was going grey around the temples already, and he looked pale and ill behind his glasses, as if he'd not slept well recently.

"Who is he?" Ron whispered.

"Professor R. J. Lupin," Hermione whispered back.

Both Ron and Harry turned to stare at her in awe.

"How did you know that?" Ron whispered, stunned. He knew Hermione was good at magic, but he hadn't known she had the Sight as well. This didn't bode well. He wasn't at all sure he wanted Hermione knowing what he was thinking. There were certain things girls should never know about their teenage male friends and relatives. He wasn't at all sure Hermione would ever get over the shock.

Fortunately for Ron, his suspicions proved to be unfounded as Hermione shattered the illusion with a single sentence.

"It's written on his luggage," she whispered, indicated a rather battered, not to mention well-travelled, leather suitcase in the luggage rack. It had the name 'Prof. R. J. Lupin' printed on the side.

"Oh." Both boys suddenly felt rather stupid. "Must be a new teacher," said Harry.

Of course, once that had been worked out, it was easy enough to guess what he'd be teaching. There was only one vacancy at Hogwarts that the three of them knew of. The position of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher.

"He's our new Defence teacher?" Ron asked, disbelieving. "Blimey, hope he's tougher than he looks. Looks like one good spell could finish him off."

Hermione looked like she was about to tell him off, but she never got the chance. A cheery voice called out from down the corridor,

"Hey, Harry!"

Harry turned to see Deanna approaching, her friends in tow.

"Hey," he smiled back. "What's up?"

"No space anywhere, so we're pitching in with you guys," said Deanna promptly. "Is this compartment free?" She peered in and noticed Professor Lupin curled up, fast asleep. "Who's he?" she asked, curious.

"New Defence teacher," Ron explained. "What do you think?"

Deanna looked him over critically. "Looks a little rough around the edges, but then that could be caused by trekking all over the world taking on monsters and Dark wizards and other fell beasties. Hang on, I'll call in the expert. Ri!"

Rianne Stormosi sauntered over, already in her uniform, yet looking strangely cool with it. Of course, that could have just been the suntan, but nevertheless there was something in her manner that had not been there last year, a strange self-assurance coupled with a slightly condescending look about her, as if she knew something you didn't, or more precisely, that you were a mere child and rather beneath her notice. Deanna didn't seem to have noticed anything though.

"Ri, we've got the new Defence teacher in here. Tell me what you think."

"New teacher, eh?" Rianne purred. "Let's have a look." She glanced into the compartment and surveyed the teacher almost casually. "Not bad. His aura bespeaks trustworthiness, there's kindheartedness and sensitivity there, and his intentions seem good..." She paused, eyes narrowing. "Hmm. Now that's interesting. He's got silver veins in his aura, wonder what that means. And there's something just below the surface, something I can't see, a hint of menace. Very strange. I think he'll be a good teacher. But don't piss him off, because he's not all he seems. I wouldn't want to be his enemy." She stopped talking, still frowning. "Can't work that out at all," she murmured softly. "It's as if he has two natures, one this good, kind, honest man, and the other this rather dark, totally hidden one..." She shook her head. "Well, whatever, he knows his stuff anyways. He's got it inside. He's been there, seen the darkness, made it his own. He's no Lockhart, this one. No Quirrell either," she added.

"Cool!" Deanna grinned. "A decent teacher, about bloody time! We need it too, with the OWLs this year."

"Right!" came an outraged shout from behind Rianne. "Who's talking about exams? We're not even out of London yet, can't you leave schoolwork alone until we at least get there?"

The voice turned out to be that of Marlie Lovegood, who pushed her way forward, glaring at them all.

"Well?" she demanded. "Who's discussing exams already?"

Everyone looked at Deanna, who looked rather guiltily at her feet. "Might have been me," she confessed.

Marlie's expression changed from anger to disbelief. "You?" she said. "Were talking about exams? Already? My gods, that is a surprise. Rianne, yes, Lu, certainly, Hermione, oh gods, yes. But you? Blimey, Tyler, what's got into you?"

"They're important, Marlie," Deanna sighed. "It's our fifth year. They're the OWLs! If you want to stay in school and actually get a proper job, you need to pass at least some of them. This year of all years, we need to work."

Marlie just shook her head. "You've changed, Tyler," was all she said. Then she looked into the compartment. "So why are we all congregating around here then?"

"New Defence teacher," Rianne said, indicating the sleeping professor. Marlie, exams forgotten, immediately brightened up, now stepping all the way in to get a good look.

"Is that him?" she breathed.

"That's him," Deanna nodded. "Rianne reckons he's a nice guy on the surface but with hidden and rather dark depths."

"Aye carumba," Marlie whistled. "He can defend me against the Dark Arts any day. About time Dumbledore hired a cute teacher!"

Rianne and Deanna rolled their eyes.

"Oh gods, not again," Deanna sighed, hauling a reluctant Marlie away.

"Come on, let's see if Lu found anywhere to sit. Where is Lu anyway?"

"Over there." Rianne pointed to where a small group of second year Ravenclaws were walking zombie-like out of a nearby compartment.

"Don't like this compartment," said one.

"Too cold," agreed another.

"Look!" exclaimed one, pointing to a different compartment entirely.

"Let's sit with these Hufflepuff sixth years who we do not know and have never met before!"

From inside the other compartment came yet another voice.

"Hey look! Ravenclaw second years who we've never seen before and would not normally pass the time of day with! Let's invite them to join us!"

"Yes! Let's!" came some more voices. The Ravenclaws obediently trooped in as another figure, that of a Slytherin fifth year with a satisfied look on her face, slipped out. Motioning to four sets of abandoned Slytherin luggage, she sent them flying into the now empty compartment and called to the others.

"Hey girls! Got us some seats!" Luella Martin, for indeed it was she, shouted to them.

"Isn't that rather unethical?" Hermione whispered.

"Bit out of character for Lu Martin, isn't it?" said Ron, scratching his head. "I thought she was all 'I'm a bit afraid of my powers, and only ever use them if forced' type of thing?"

Rianne shrugged apologetically. "My fault. I took her on holiday to meet my strega relatives and, erm, they kinda took her under their wing. I think they've been a bit of a bad influence on her."

"Well, it got us a car to ourselves, so let's be thankful and get this one out of here before she starts drooling," said Deanna, hastening Marlie away. "See you guys at school! Later, Harry." The Slytherins headed off.

Harry, shaking his head, set about installing himself and his friends into the compartment with the sleeping professor. What with Sirius Black on the loose, a new teacher with a hidden darkness, and now Luella,

strega influenced and less ethically minded than before, this looked set to be an interesting year.

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With everyone settled and the train now under way, the four girls were settled into their compartment, all together again for the first time in weeks. It proved to be a raucous affair for all concerned. The initial hugging and squealing of delight had been got over with on the platform, but there was still a lot to talk about. Once they'd all settled in, Luella and Rianne began regaling the others with tales of the Stormosi villa in Milan, and Rianne's Italian relatives, mainly her aunt Chiara and her husband Tony, and their four children, Rianne's cousins. The two younger ones, Bianca and Giuseppe (or Little Joey as everyone called him), were ten and seven, and they hadn't really seen much of them. However, the older two, Adriana and Sebastiano, were closer to their age, being seventeen and fifteen, and they'd spent a lot of time hanging out together.

"Adriana took me shopping," said Luella, proudly showing off a pink halter-neck sleeveless wool top that she'd fallen in love with. "Look at this! Genuine angora, this!" She held out the edge so that Marlie and Deanna could feel it.

"Ooh!" squealed Marlie. "It's so soft! Feel that, Tyler!"

Deanna felt it and had to agree. "Very nice. How much did that set you back?"

Luella smiled, looking rather satisfied with her self. "Normally about three hundred quid. However, after much haggling and bargaining, I was able to persuade them to accept thirty for it."

"Thirty quid??" Both Deanna and Marlie stared at her in awe.

"How'd you manage that?" Deanna demanded.

"Glamoury," sighed Rianne wearily. "How else?"

Marlie and Deanna exchanged glances.

"Lu, that's wrong," said Deanna, frowning. "I thought you were going to only use your powers for ethical reasons? That's what you told me."

"I am!" Luella said, none too convincingly. "I will, I promise. Just that Adriana found out I had Glamoury, and..."

"Adriana found out she had Glamoury, and started persuading her to get up to all manner of mischief with it," Rianne sighed, with the air of one who'd had this conversation many, many times before. "I did try to rein her in, but she kinda went a bit overboard."

"Ah come on, Ri, can you blame me?" Luella pouted, oblivious to the rather disapproving looks her friends were giving her. "I was in another country, away from my parents and teachers for the first time since getting my powers, is it any wonder I decide to let my hair down and have a little fun? Anyway, perhaps if you hadn't been so busy with Signor Vetinari..." She let her voice trail off, the implication needing no spelling out. Marlie seized on it at once.

"Oh, so he was there as well, was he?" she grinned. "No wonder you were leaving Lu to your cousins all summer! Explains everything, if the lovely Lucas tagged along. Was there much snogging?"

Luella rolled her eyes. "Was there! You should have seen the two of them on the plane over, holding hands and giggling, staring into each other's eyes. And as for when we got back, the amount of hugging and tearful goodbyes... Anyone would think they'd never see each other again."

Normally, Rianne would have been a little embarrassed at all the details of her love life being revealed to all and sundry. However, she had a little dirt of her own to dish.

"And of course, there was *none* of that at Milan airport when you were saying goodbye to my cousin Sebi, was there?"

Now it was Luella's turn to go pink and start looking embarrassed, as Marlie and Deanna turned on her.

"Cousin Sebi?" asked Deanna, wonder in her eyes. "What's all this about Cousin Sebi?"

"Don't tell me you had a fling with him!" Marlie shrieked. "Oh my god! Lu Martin had a holiday romance with Rianne's cousin! Oh my god!"

"Shut up!" Luella hissed, mortified. "It was not a holiday romance! Just because we spent lots of time together! And held hands once or twice." Luella hesitated, remembering a few more details. "And then there was that kiss next to the fountain," she admitted, as her friends started shrieking and laughing all the more. "OK, OK, maybe you could call it a holiday romance."

"Lu's got a boyfriend, Lu's got a boyfriend!" Marlie chanted gleefully. Luella took a swipe at her.

"Marlie, shut up, he is not my boyfriend!" she snapped.

"That's what they all say," Rianne smiled.

"Can it, you two," Deanna told them, before turning to Luella. "You gonna stay in touch?" she asked.

Luella shrugged. "Maybe. He said he'd write, but I think we both know it's going nowhere. What with me being in England, heck, Scotland most of the year, and him being in Italy and all."

Deanna took her friend's hand, guessing how things had ended out there. "Miss him?" she asked.

"A bit," Luella nodded. "He was cool, you know? And cute. And funny. And he looked great in tight jeans." She flashed Deanna a mischievous grin.

"A relationship based on really deep emotions then," replied Deanna solemnly. Although it wasn't long before mirth had reclaimed her and both girls soon found themselves laughing.

Finally, they dried their eyes. "Ah well," sighed Luella. "It was fun while it lasted. At least I got a snog out of it."

"Which is more than any of us have ever had, so count yourself lucky," Marlie told her. Rianne coughed loudly at this, causing Marlie to roll her eyes. "OK, OK, apart from Rianne, who is never without male company."

"One male in particular," Luella said, grinning. Rianne just smiled, silently acknowledging the truth behind that remark. Deanna was not slow to pounce on its significance.

"Oh, so he is officially your boyfriend then? We had wondered."

Now it was Rianne's turn to roll her eyes. "After all the time he and I have spent together over the last year or so? Duh. We've been an item for months."

"You could have told us earlier!" Marlie snapped. Rianne just shrugged.

"Didn't know if he was interested at first. Hell, wasn't sure I was for a while! But yeah, Lucas is my official boyfriend," she admitted, starting to blush. "OK, you may now commence the ridicule."

Marlie responded by squealing and hugging her friend, while Luella smiled and squeezed Rianne's hands.

"Congrats," she said quietly. "You two are good together."

"Thanks," said Rianne, smiling and eyes suddenly bright. No doubt about it, she looked happy. Radiantly so.

"Ditto," said Deanna. However, there was something in her eyes that didn't share the general happiness. It wasn't anger or disapproval. But there was sadness there, and Luella picked up on it straight away.

"What's up, mate?" she asked quietly.

"Nothing really," sighed Deanna. "It's just that, now it's definite, this Rianne seeing Lucas thing, it feels weird."

"Weird how?" Luella pressed.

Deanna shook her head. "Well, before it was always the four of us hanging out, friends forever, you know? Yes, I know we each had other friends and interests, I had Quidditch, you had Penny, Harry and Hermione, Marls had the Clearwaters and Weasley twins, and Rianne had Lucas as a friend, but there was always this feeling that they weren't so important as the four of us. That we were special." She looked at Rianne, still enthusing with Marlie. "Now Ri's got someone she cares for as much as she does us, and it's gonna be weird. Like she's not part of us as much anymore. And I'm not sure I like the idea of that."

"Relax, Tyler," came Rianne's voice. She was watching them both carefully and had obviously heard every word, although they'd done their best to keep their voices down. "I'm still one of you guys. You'll always be my mates, whatever happens. Relationships have a tendency to break up and boys have a tendency to leave. But a set of good girl friends can last a lifetime." Her eyes were still shining, but no longer lovestruck. Now they seemed to burn with a different kind of passion, a loyalty as fierce as any romance. Fiercer, even. "Believe it," she said softly.

Deanna looked straight into her eyes, and started to smile, her doubts fading away. "I do," she replied.

Rianne smiled. "Good." She turned to Luella. "And as for you, kid, don't fret. I won't tell Lucas about you. He shall learn nothing of your true nature unless I hear it personally from you that it's OK. Even if Snape, Mrs. Lovegood or Caitlin Tyler tell me it's fine, he's being brought in, I would still check with you first."

"Thanks," said Luella, profoundly relieved. Even though she'd never seriously doubted Rianne's integrity, nevertheless she'd been worried. Deanna's comments about Rianne having divided loyalties may have been unfounded, but they were still fair.

"No worries," Rianne answered. "Never try and hide these things from a Seer, we have ways of knowing."

Marlie had by this time released Rianne. "Oh my god," she gasped. "I so cannot believe you've got a boyfriend! That is so unbelievable, congratulations! Mind you, you and Lucas have had a thing going for a while now, so it's not really that much of a surprise. And you are the oldest, after all."

"Oldest and wisest," Rianne grinned. "Well, apart from Lu, anyway," she added, indicating her friend.

"Yeah, wisdom pretty much comes with the whole superhero territory," smirked Luella.

"Ooh, get you," laughed Deanna, shoving her friend playfully.

Marlie, however, was looking unusually thoughtful. "And if you're the oldest, that makes me second oldest. Which means it's now about time I started looking for a boyfriend."

"Oh gods," sighed Deanna. "Does this mean you're going to spend even *more* time in front of the mirror, preening yourself?"

"Looks like it," Rianne agreed. "Lock up your make-up, girls, Marls is on the pull."

"Marls is always on the pull," Deanna pointed out. "She flirts with every boy she meets."

"Yeah, but that was just a bit of fun," Marlie protested. "Now I'm doing it for real. After all," she indicated her rather curvaceous figure, "look at me! I'm blonde, I'm gorgeous, I'm a C-cup, why am I still single? I must have tons of admirers! Half the blokes in school must fancy me. Let's face it, there is no rational reason whatsoever for such a dazzlingly beautiful individual to still be single!"

Deanna produced a cough which sounded suspiciously like "Egotist!" while Luella just turned away with a smile.

"None whatsoever," Rianne said casually. "Humility and modesty are overrated virtues anyway."

The irony completely failed to register with Marlie. "Exactly!" she pouted. "I'm great, me! About time I had someone fall helplessly in love with me and become my adoring slave."

"Methinks someone's rather missed the point about going out with someone," Luella murmured to no one in particular. Deanna smiled in agreement, although Marlie didn't seem to have heard a thing.

"It can be my goal for the year," Marlie continued. "Acquire a love-struck admirer who will worship me and do whatever I tell him to. And when that's done, I can then see Madam Pomfrey about some contraception potion and set merrily about losing my virginity."

"What?" choked Deanna, not sure whether she'd heard right.

"Losing your..." gasped Luella. "You sure?"

Marlie looked around as if she didn't know what they meant. "Well, duh!" she said, flicking her hair back. "I'm not a kid any more. It's time I got into that whole adult relationships/sex thing. Come on, I'll be sixteen in November. Age of consent and all that."

"Marlie, just because you're legally allowed to do it, doesn't mean you have to," Deanna pointed out. "It's not compulsory or anything."

"So?" Marlie shrugged. "It sounds cool, I want to know what it's like, and besides, a woman of my stature shouldn't remain unshagged. It's wrong. Not to mention bloody misleading."

"Worried about trades descriptions violations, are we?" Rianne teased. Marlie took a swipe at her, not amused.

"Would have thought virginity'd be a plus in that line of business," Deanna remarked, from a safe distance.

"Wonder what it's like, anyway?" said Luella, gazing out of the window, lost in thought. "Having sex, I mean."

"Oh, it's pretty good," Rianne said idly, before suddenly realising what she'd said and going a violent shade of scarlet.

The other three all turned to look, their own quarrels forgotten.

"What?" gasped Deanna. "You've done it?"

"You've done it!" Marlie squealed. "And you never told us?"

"Keep your voice down," hissed Rianne. "Yes, alright, I've had sex. Lucas and I did it over the summer, before we went on holiday. I was staying over for a week or so at his house, and we had a lot of time to ourselves, what with Lydia visiting the Weasleys, his mum at her gallery most of the day and Laetitia on this work placement abroad. And well, one thing led to another, Lucas chased up some contraception potion, and before we knew it, there we were."

Understanding dawned in Luella's eyes. "So that's why you two were all over each other in Italy," she said. Her eyes hardened a little. "You could have told me."

"Didn't really get the chance, I was never alone with you long enough, and it's not the sort of thing I wanted to discuss in front of half my family, you know?" Rianne said sheepishly.

"But you can discuss it in front of us, right?" grinned Marlie, kneeling hopefully at Rianne's feet.

"Yeah, come on," said Deanna, joining her. "You can't not tell us the details. Not now."

Rianne turned to Luella, appealing for her support. She was to be disappointed. Luella, smiling, joined her friends.

"Go on, Ri. You've got to tell us now. After all, we're going to be getting boyfriends ourselves sooner or later, and we'll need to know what to expect, won't we? See it as part of our ongoing education," Luella grinned.

"Well, I can't speak for boys in general," Rianne said. "Only for Lucas. And seeing as none of you are ever going to be dating Lucas..."

The other three were not slow in getting her point.

"Of course not."

"No way, Ri."

"Lucas Vetinari, out of bounds forever. Understood, Ri," said Marlie. Her natural coquettishness resurfaced immediately. "So now that's out of the way, what's it like to shag him? Is he any good?"

Rianne smiled, her earlier embarrassment behind her. "Gather round, girls, and I shall tell you all."

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The conversation went on for quite some time. So long, in fact, that before they knew it, it was getting dark, and a thunderstorm had broken out outside. Indeed, had they but known it, they weren't far from their destination. Which was why none of them were really concerned when the train juddered to a halt. Not at first, anyway.

"We here already?" yawned Marlie. "That was quick."

Deanna looked at her watch, frowning. "Yeah, it was. Too quick. Lu, have a look outside, will you? I have a bad feeling about this."

Luella glanced out of the window, fully expecting to see Hogsmeade station rolling into view. Which is why she drew back, troubled, on seeing nothing but mountains and pine trees.

"Um, girls?" she said, reaching for her wand. "I think we may be in trouble."

Rianne had already dug her wand out. "We are," she said quietly. "Hogsmeade's another twenty miles yet. I don't like this."

Marlie squealed, clapping her hands to her ears. "Oh gods!" she cried. "We're going to die! We're going to die!"

"Marlie, shut up!" Deanna snapped. "We are not going to die!" She turned to Rianne, a note of anxiety creeping through. "We're not, are we?"

"Don't think so," Rianne replied. "But I don't tend to get a lot of warning with these things."

Marlie was still having hysterics. "Don't you see!" she implored. "This is what always happens in the films! If you break down in the middle of nowhere during a thunderstorm, something awful always happens! It's practically a law!"

"There's someone getting on the train," said Luella, still gazing out of the window. Marlie's composure dissolved entirely as she heard this.

"OH MY GOD!" she screamed. "WE'RE GOING TO DIE!"

"Will you stop saying that!" Deanna yelled back at her. "We're not going to die!"

It was at that moment that the lamps went out. This time Marlie's scream could have shattered Muggle glass a mile away. At least until Rianne grabbed hold of her and clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Well, thank you very much!" she hissed. "Draw their attention over here, why don't you?"

"Don't worry, Ri," said Deanna heavily. "She's not the only one panicking. I doubt they'll single us out." Sure enough, screaming could be heard all the way down the train. Not all the screams were female, either.

Another sound behind the four girls soon distracted them, as the door clicked open. Whirling round, Deanna pointed her wand at the intruder.

"Show yourself!" she commanded. "I want your hands in the air and your wands away."

"OK!" a trembling girl's voice answered her. In the half light, Deanna could make out the unmistakeable red hair of Ginny Weasley, hands in the air and looking terrified. Sighing inwardly, she lowered her wand.

"Gin," she breathed. "Thank Artemis it's only you. Come in, our kid."

Still shaking, Ginny scurried in, beckoning her two friends, Autumn and Lydia, to come in behind her. Autumn made sure to close the door behind them, while Lydia went straight over to Rianne, who put a protective arm around the second year.

"What's going on, Ri?" Lydia asked, sounding more frightened than any of them had ever seen her. "Why've we stopped?"

"I don't know," Rianne answered. "But I'm sure we'll be OK."

"Can we stay with you?" Ginny asked, looking at Deanna. "Just... we don't want to be on our own."

"Course you can," said Deanna gently. "Here, you two sit in the middle with Marlie."

"That's right," Rianne nodded. "Keep the children and cowards out of the way."

"Hey!" snapped Marlie, outraged. "I am not a coward!"

"Well then, stop screaming like a wuss every five minutes!" Rianne countered.

"Quiet!" said Luella, leaping to her feet. "There's someone outside!"

That shut them up. Seven hands reached for their wands, everyone staring at the door. And then the handle began to turn.

Heart pounding, Deanna pointed her wand at the door, somehow knowing that this time it was for real, that the sinister strangers Luella had seen entering the train were right behind the door. Although she knew Luella and Rianne were behind her with their own wands at the

ready, and that Marlie was even now easing the window open to provide an escape route, that didn't ease her fear. Okay, Tyler, time to find out if you really do have what it takes to be an Auror...

The door opened, and the room froze. Time seemed to stand still as a tall, cloaked figure drifted into view. Veiled in robes, a hood hiding its face, for which Deanna was truly thankful, the intimidating figure before them could only be one thing. One of the dread Dementors of Azkaban.

Dementors. Well, it could be worse. At least I know a charm to get rid of them. Of course, she'd never actually cast it in real life before, and wasn't entirely sure how, but it was certainly worth a try.

"Expecto Patro-" she started, and then it happened. The Dementor started to breathe in, seeming to suck the very heart out of the room, and the warmth with it. The room became bitterly cold, and Deanna felt her power draining away. Her wand fell from her grasp, cold, damp fog seemed to cloud her mind and her vision, and she sank to her knees clutching her head as memories long forgotten came rushing back.

"No, no, don't," she moaned. "Don't hurt her, don't!" With every word, her voice went higher, subtly shifting from that of a fifteen year old to that of a very small child. A lost and lonely small child. "Go 'way, go 'way!" she whimpered. "Bad men, hurt mummy! Auntie, make 'em stop! Mummy, make 'em go 'way! Mummy!" she sobbed, curling into a foetal position.

The others were not much better off, although none of them were crumpled on the floor the way Deanna was. Rianne was near tears herself, also calling for her mother. "Where are they taking her?" she was sobbing. "They're taking her away; bring her back!"

The three second years weren't saying much, at least Autumn and Lydia weren't. They were rooted to the spot, numb with fear. Ginny for her part was shaking all over, whispering "I won't, I won't, I won't!" over and over again.

Marlie could dimly hear the younger girl through her own veil of mist. No memories for her, just cold and dark and a terrible feeling of isolation. They are gone, they are gone, they cannot help me and I am all on my own, and no cat will save me this time... It was as if the last four years had never happened, and she was right back in her trance

again, the terrifying early part when she'd been utterly lost and all alone before her pet cat Snowy had come to find her. Not even the later battles with her dark twin Morticia had been as frightening as that early bit.

"Tish, where are you?" she whispered, reaching for her necklace out of habit, the necklace that was the very essence of her power. The necklace was still and silent, cold and seemingly dead as her fingers reached the little Snitch and clasped it tightly.

And then it shot into life, warming her fingers, sending a breeze through the mists about her mind and snapping her back into reality as she heard Morticia's voice in her brain, whispering "Dear sister, I'd never leave you! Take heart, it cannot really hurt you."

Looking up, Marlie took in the scene around her. All about her, her friends were lying on the floor or on their knees, all terrified, all helpless before this thing. All except her. Oh great. I have to save them all, and I have no idea how. Where's our resident superhero when you need her?

Luella for her part was sitting near the window, eyes clenched tight, wand on the floor, half-lying on the seats.

"No! Not my wand!" she was weeping. "I didn't do it, I swear! It wasn't me, you have to believe me!"

Poor thing, she's reliving the day they expelled her, Marlie realised, with a jolt of sympathy. Getting up, she sat next to Luella, picking her wand up and pressing it into her hand.

"Lu, it's OK, you're not expelled, they let you back in. It's OK, kid! Really!" She leaned over and planted a kiss on the top of Luella's head and at that moment, two things happened.

One was that Luella's fingers found her wand and curled around it, determined never to let it go again. The other was that Marlie's necklace dangled down and touched the top of Luella's head.

"Ghyah!" Luella gasped, sitting bolt upright, nearly knocking Marlie out.

"Ow!" snapped Marlie, glaring at her. "Mind what you're doing, you could have severely injured me!"

"Sorry," said Luella, looking around her, seemingly unaffected by the Dementor. "What's going on?"

"Dementor," Marlie informed her. "Must be looking for Sirius Black. They suck life and joy out of people, which is why the entire carriage is poleaxed. Apart from us. Any bright ideas, oh great and mighty Redeemer?"

"Funnily enough, no," replied Luella, a touch annoyed that the year had only just begun and already she was being expected to save everybody's life again. "Having never seen one of these things before, I've no idea how to repel it. Did you ever bother to listen to your mother while she was lecturing you on kicking Dementor arse?"

"No, she never really discussed things like that with us," Marlie snapped. "Dad never let her bring her work home with her. And, er, Lu, you might want to hurry up. It's looking at us."

Sure enough, the Dementor had turned in their direction, clearly wanting to know why the two girls weren't yielding up any happiness. And it was beginning to move towards them. Marlie started to shuffle behind Luella. "Do something!" she hissed.

Shooting Marlie a murderous glare, Luella got to her feet, pushing her friend behind her. She still had no idea what to do, but Caitlin had taught her some Auror charms before now, one of them might come in useful. Pointing her wand at the Dementor, she began racking her brains. Think, Lu! If she were here, what would Caitlin Tyler do?

The image of Caitlin swam before her eyes, Caitlin calm, in control, ahead of her game and looking forward to getting to work. Caitlin Tyler reaching for her wand... And in that instant, as soon as the thought of Caitlin entered her head, something happened to her wand. Luella had always thought that it might have a life of its own, and now it was proving her right. She could only watch in awe as some strange entity seemed to take her over and, as her Mark started to burn, used her hand to lift her wand and her mouth to cry out the words "Expecto Patronum!"

A giant silver lion sprang from the wand, leaping towards the Dementor and pushing it back with its paws. As soon as it made contact, the Dementor stopped breathing and the room returned to normal. Without another sound, the Dementor turned and left, the door closing behind it. Its job done, the lion disappeared.

"That was some Patronus!" Marlie breathed.

"It was?" asked Luella, herself once more and faintly bewildered.

Marlie nodded. "I'll say! That was immense!"

In the opposite corner, Rianne was stirring. "What happened?" she asked, sounding exhausted.

"Lu just cast the Patronus Charm!" Marlie squealed. That got Rianne's attention.

"She did?" she asked, alert once more. "How?"

"I don't know," Luella whispered, looking at her wand with new eyes. "I just found myself doing it."

"You shoulda seen it, Ri!" Marlie exclaimed. "It was cool beyond all reckoning!"

"I bet," said Rianne, looking at Luella strangely. "It takes years of training to master that one! How'd you know how to do that, Lu?"

"I didn't," Luella replied. "I mean, I don't." She was still staring at her wand, but now she was beginning to realise what had happened. "But my wand did." She held it lovingly. "Thanks, Medea," she whispered.

On the floor, the three second years were coming to. Autumn and Lydia seemed OK, if a little shaken. Ginny, however, was still looking very pale.

"Are you alright, Gin?" Lydia was asking, concerned.

"I think so," Ginny whispered, still looking scared. However, it soon became apparent to Luella that it wasn't just the Dementor that had scared her. She was staring straight ahead at Deanna, who was still curled up on the floor.

"Ginny?" asked Luella, a new fear rising in her throat. "What's the matter?"

Ginny nodded at Deanna. "Is she OK?" she whispered.

Luella got up and went over to her friend. "Deanna?" she asked, touching her arm. Deanna didn't move. Trying not to panic, Luella shook her. "Deanna?" she asked, her voice increasing in pitch.

Rianne joined her, anxiety on her own face. "Lu, it's not good," she whispered. "Her aura, it's..."

"What?" Luella asked, trying to keep her voice level. "It's not black, is it?"

Rianne shook her head. "No. It's... not there. She's got no aura, Lu!"

Luella shook her head. That was impossible, everyone had an aura. Everyone alive had one, until the day they died. Everyone alive...

"Oh gods... Deanna!" Luella yelled, no longer caring about staying calm. "Talk to me! Deanna!" She was shaking Deanna's shoulder as hard as she could, heedless of anything other than her friend's wellbeing. "Deanna, please!" she wept. Giving Deanna's shoulder one last tug, she pulled her friend on to her back.

Deanna fell heavily on to the ground, flopping lifelessly over, dark eyes staring expressionlessly at nothing. By this time Marlie had joined them.

"Is she OK?" Marlie whispered, gazing down at her friend.

Luella shook her head, too choked to answer. It was Rianne who had taken Deanna's wrist in her hand and started examining her.

"There's a pulse; she's alive," Rianne replied. "Breathing seems OK too, she's just not responding to us. It's like she's not there, as if her mind's gone walkabout."

"What does that mean?" asked Marlie, blankly.

"I don't know," Rianne frowned.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" Marlie snapped. "You spend half your life studying, did all those books tell you nothing useful?"

"I mean," Rianne seethed, "I don't know what's wrong with her! I'm not a mediwitch, how do I know?"

Marlie glared at her before turning to Luella. "Lu, you can help her, surely? Can't you?"

Luella didn't answer. She was still staring at her friend in a state of shock, tears rolling silently down her face.

"Lu?" Marlie asked, before finally throwing up her hands in despair. "Does no one on this train know what to do?" she cried out.

At that, Rianne looked up, something occurring to her. Yes, there was indeed someone on the train who might very well know what to do.

"Marlie, stop hyperventilating and listen!" she snapped. Marlie lowered her hands and looked at her, the change in Rianne's attitude halting her in her tracks. She didn't know what, but Rianne seemed to have an idea. And Rianne's ideas generally worked.

"Ri?" she asked.

"Get Professor Lupin," Rianne said calmly. "He'll know what to do."

"Who?" asked Marlie blankly.

"The new teacher," said Rianne. "You know, the one you were lusting after earlier."

"Oh!" Marlie's memory returned to her. Of course. The cutie in desperate need of a personal shopper. She remembered him. "Right. Yes. Of course." However, she didn't move.

"Well?" Rianne snapped, fast losing her patience. "Get a move on then!"

"Oh. Right. On my way," Marlie said hastily, before scrambling to her feet and darting out into the corridor.

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Chapter Six The Persistence of Memory

Marlie raced down the train, trying to remember where Lupin had been. In the very end carriage, wasn't he? She certainly hoped so, because that was where she was heading.

A dark shape emerged into the corridor ahead of her, causing her to skid to a halt. No mistaking that dim figure. It was the Dementor that

had invaded their carriage, or if not, another one very like it. Marlie fingered her necklace and took a step backwards. This wasn't good. Luella wasn't here this time and she hadn't been in any state to repel anything back in their compartment. Not after seeing Deanna like that.

Fortunately, Marlie was in luck. The Dementor looked her over, before evidently deciding that she wasn't worth bothering with, and moving on. It opened one of the outer doors, and stepped out into the gloom. The door clicked shut behind it. Marlie felt the temperature start to rise almost immediately. She looked around, but there didn't seem to be any others in the area.

She investigated the compartment it had just left. Well, what did you know. It was the very one she'd been after, with Professor Lupin himself tending to Harry Potter. He seemed to be offering the boy chocolate, snapping off an extra large piece. Marlie could smell the distinctive aroma from out in the corridor, salivating as the delicious smell of chocolatey goodness hit her nostrils.

"Oh gods," she murmured. "Chocolate!" As one sleepwalking, she pushed the door open and walked in.

"Excuse me, but if there's free chocolate being given out, I know some very deserving young kiddies who'd be very grateful," she began, turning on her most appealing smile.

Ron looked up at her, rolling his eyes. "Sorry, Lovegood," he said with a grin. "Only available to Dementor victims."

Marlie folded her arms, hurt by his insinuations that she was on the scrounge. Just because they were true...

"Hey, I came face to face with a Dementor myself not two minutes ago!" she snapped. "I'm highly traumatised!"

"You look devastated, Marls," Ron deadpanned back at her. Hermione, however, was looking at her rather more thoughtfully.

"You knew what they were," she said, raising an eyebrow. Marlie just sighed.

"Well, duh. My mum's head of the DDAE and lest we forget, last year, Tyler's mum sent half her library up to school. I do occasionally read, you know!"

"Blimey," muttered Ron, shaking his head in disbelief. Marlie shot a glare at him but didn't get the chance to respond. Lupin's ears had pricked up when she'd mentioned who her mother was and he was getting to his feet.

"Did I hear right?" he asked, apparently curious. "Are you Melissa Lovegood's daughter?"

"Yeah, that's right, I'm Marle-" her voice cut off mid-sentence as her eyes met Lupin's and the world stopped. Brilliant amber his eyes were, a striking, luminous gold that shone with an inner fire that belied his gentle temperament. They were eyes you could drown in. And drown in them Marlie did, her world spinning right off its axis and into the void.

For what seemed like several eternities, nothing happened, just blue eyes locked with amber while the world watched. Until a cough and the voice of Hermione Granger shattered the moment.

"Er... Professor Lupin?"

"Hmm?" Lupin glanced away, seeming to come around, although he was having difficulty taking his eyes off Marlie.

"Weren't you going to talk to the driver?" Hermione pressed him.

"Er, yes. Yes, I was," he said hastily, shaking his head as if to clear it.

"Yes, that's right. I need to see the driver."

At these words, Marlie herself came round. Driver... he was going to see the driver. Going away. Away from her, taking those beautiful golden eyes away from her...

"You can't!" Marlie burst out. Oh, nice one Marlie, she mentally kicked herself. Couldn't you have thought of a better excuse than that?

Lupin blinked at this outburst, although he seemed to be taking her seriously.

"Why's that?" he asked.

"Er..." And then it hit her. Of course, she had a perfectly legitimate, indeed, morally laudable reason for keeping him near her. Deanna lying on the floor of the compartment, catatonic and not responding to anyone or anything. "My friend!" she gasped. "She... A Dementor came in our compartment, and she was trying to get it to leave, and... and..." She paused for breath. "Sir, she's just lying on the floor, not responding to anyone or anything. I mean, she's alive, but her eyes are just blank, it's like there's no one there! Can you do anything?"

Lupin's eyes had widened as she'd spoken.

"Breathing but not responding?" he said sharply. "And she was facing a Dementor?"

"That's right!" Marlie nodded, beginning to feel worried. This sounded serious.

"Take me to her," he said, wrenching the door open and indicating for Marlie to lead the way. Shrugging, she went out.

"What's the girl's name?" Lupin asked as they made their way along the corridor.

"Deanna. Deanna Tyler," Marlie answered.

A gasp of horror came from behind them.

"Deanna?" cried Harry. He'd followed them out of the compartment and was standing behind them, his eyes staring and his face etched with distress. "Is she alright?" he asked, eyes imploring them to answer yes.

"Well, that's what I'm about to find out," said Lupin gently. "Harry, why don't you wait with your friends? If there's anything to report, I'll drop by and let you know."

Harry shook his head. "No. I want to see her. I want to know if she's OK."

Lupin opened his mouth to speak, but it was Marlie who got there first.

"Wait," she said.

Lupin stopped, turning to look at her, questions in his eyes.

"Let him come," she said. "He deserves to know."

Lupin nodded, acquiescing. Turning around, Marlie led them away.

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"You took your time!" Rianne snapped as Marlie opened the door.

"Hey!" Marlie snapped as Lupin and Harry entered. "I had to fill Professor Lupin in on the situation! It took time, OK?"

Rianne looked sceptical but said nothing, turning her attention to Professor Lupin. "Professor," she said, inclining her head.

Lupin briefly acknowledged her, before turning to Deanna. "Is this Miss Tyler?"

They'd lifted her up and moved her to one side, and she was now sitting on the floor with her back against the seat, knees almost under her chin, arms wrapped around them, rocking backwards and forwards. Her eyes were still staring into space, but there was an animated quality to them that hadn't been there before.

"She looks, er, better," said Marlie uncertainly.

"Lydia suggested trying the Enervate Charm," said Rianne. "It did something, but she's still not responding to anyone."

Luella was sitting next to her, an arm around Deanna's shoulder, and her other hand on Deanna's knee, eyes filled with fear. She looked up as Lupin knelt beside her.

"Is she going to be alright?" she whispered.

Lupin looked at Deanna critically, but he did not look as worried as he had done.

"Maybe," he said, brushing Deanna's hair back and studying her face. "Things aren't as serious as I thought, although they are still far from well. She's been like this ever since the Dementor arrived?"

"That's right," Luella nodded. "It came in, started sucking the life out of the room, and she was nearest to it, and she just collapsed..." She choked back her words, trying not to cry.

"Don't worry," Lupin said, softening his voice. "I think she's going to be alright, but I'll need you to help me. What was she trying to do when the Dementor started feeding?"

Luella racked her brains, trying to remember. The aftermath of the Dementor attack had driven the preceding events from her mind, and once it had started its mindsuck, she'd been too gone to notice. But something in Lupin's manner helped settle her thoughts.

"She was trying to get rid of it, hex it," Luella said, voice trembling. "Her mum's an Auror, she's taught Deanna a lot. She always leaps straight into these things, thinks she's invulnerable." Luella gave a hollow laugh. "I think she thinks it's her responsibility to protect the rest of us."

"Laudable sentiments," Lupin said, turning his attention back to Deanna. "Then what?"

"She started saying the charm, and then it happened. That... thing..." Luella shuddered, "started breathing in, and everything just went grey and cold. I don't really remember what happened, just that Deanna stopped talking and just collapsed."

"And then the Dementor left, and you all came round apart from your friend here," Lupin surmised.

"Er... kind of," said Luella, not wanting to have to explain to a total stranger what actually happened.

Unfortunately, Autumn had no such scruples. "Sir, Luella cast the Patro- mmph!"

Rianne had grabbed her from behind and clapped a hand over her mouth. "Shut it," she murmured, before turning to everyone else with a smile. "Ignore the child, she's still delirious from the Dementor attack," she purred, before releasing the girl, shooting her a murderous glare. Lupin raised an eyebrow but said nothing, turning back to Deanna.

"I see," was all he said. "Tell me, at any point in proceedings, did the Dementor lift its hood back at all?"

Luella shook her head. "No. No, I don't think so."

"It didn't," said Marlie. "It still had its hood up when Lu and I came round, and it hadn't moved between then and when it came in."

Lupin smiled a little at this, seemingly relieved. "Then it's not what I first feared. That's a relief to know."

"So what is wrong with her then?" Marlie asked.

"Can it be cured?" asked Ginny nervously.

"I think so," Lupin answered. "This isn't a common reaction to Dementors but I have heard of it happening. Usually it occurs after prolonged exposure to Dementors, but if the victim has severe traumas in their past, it can happen the first time they're attacked."

"Severe traumas?" This time, it was Harry who spoke up. Sitting next to Deanna and taking one of her hands, he was looking visibly pale. "What sort of severe trauma?"

"Could be anything," Lupin replied. "Violence, abuse, torture, the death of someone close to them. Has Deanna suffered anything like that, that you know of?"

All eyes turned to Luella, who shook her head vehemently. "No," she answered firmly. "I mean, she didn't have an easy childhood, she never knew her dad, but she was never abused! I mean, I'd have known, I grew up with her, she'd have told me something like that!"

Something seemed to dawn in Lupin's eyes as he looked at Deanna again, then to Harry, then back to Deanna.

"She's Caitlin Tyler's daughter, isn't she?" he said softly. Luella and Harry both nodded.

"And she's, what, fifteen? Sixteen?"

"Fifteen," Luella whispered. "Sixteen in July."

Lupin appeared to be doing some rapid calculations in his head. "She would have been three years old when that happened," he said to himself. "Yes, that would fit. Old enough to know, young enough not to remember. Or not want to remember." Leaning forward, kneeling next to Deanna, he cupped her face in his hands and turned her to face him.

"Deanna," he said, softly but clearly enough so that they could hear every word. "Deanna. Can you hear me?"

She didn't respond, but Luella could swear that her eyes had just flickered. Lupin tried again.

"Deanna," he said. "It's alright. Everything's going to be OK."

This time, Luella knew something had happened. Deanna visibly trembled. Lupin continued, reaching inside his robes for some chocolate.

"Don't be afraid, Deanna," he said tenderly. "You're safe now. You don't need to be frightened, no one will hurt you."

Deanna flinched away from him, whimpering a little, like a frightened animal. Lupin began stroking her hair, soothing her.

"Your mother's fine, Deanna," he said. Luella blinked, exchanging glances with Rianne and Marlie. How did Lupin know that her mother was involved? Very strange. However, it seemed to do the trick.

"They were hurting her," Deanna whispered. "I saw it. She was... on the ground... and they were all around her... laughing." She sniffed, as if she were about to cry. Luella put an arm around her, trying to comfort her.

"Deanna," Luella whispered. "Don't cry, it's OK."

Deanna was still staring at Lupin as he offered her a piece of chocolate. She took it hesitantly, and ate it without a word. Lupin waited until she'd finished before speaking again.

"It's just a memory," he said, still in that calm, gentle voice. "Just a memory. It's long gone, it happened a very long time ago, it's over now. She's OK now, not hurting anymore."

"Scared," Deanna whispered, tears starting to roll down her cheeks. "I was so scared!"

"Of course you were," Lupin replied, still stroking her hair. "You were only a little girl, it must have been terrifying."

Deanna nodded. "I thought I was going to die!" she wept, her voice cracking on the last word.

"But you didn't," Lupin said, hardening his voice slightly. "You survived, and your mother survived, and it was nearly twelve years ago now, and you and your mother both are alive and well, and it is just a memory. You are fifteen years old, and you can leave the past behind if you want to." He gazed at her, challenging her. "Do you want to leave it behind?"

"Yes," Deanna whispered. "Yes, Artemis, yes!"

"Then leave it," said Lupin, his voice now stern and commanding as he stepped back and got to his feet, hand outstretched. "Leave it, and return to the present, to your real life, your friends and family. Come, Deanna! Deanna Tyler, come!"

Slowly, unsteadily, Deanna began to get to her feet, leaning on Luella and Harry for support at first, until she saw Lupin's outstretched hand, then reaching out and taking hold of it. As soon as she'd done so,

Lupin tightened his grip, pulled her all the way up and caught her as she staggered forward, holding her upright until she'd steadied herself.

"Are you alright?" he asked her. Deanna nodded, wordlessly.

"Can you stand?" Lupin asked.

"I... I think so," said Deanna, although she didn't look sure. Rianne got up and went over to her, taking her off Lupin's hands and guiding her to a seat. Deanna sat down and looked back at Lupin, a smile spreading across her face. "Thanks!" she whispered.

"Will she be alright?" Luella asked him.

Lupin nodded. "I think so, for now at least. Plenty of food and a good night's sleep will undo the worst of the mischief, and good friends will help the rest. But just to be on the safe side..." He produced the rest of the slab of chocolate and handed it to her. "Eat this. It's one of the surest cures for the Dementor blues there is."

Deanna's eyes lit up on seeing the chocolate, and she lost no time in taking it and tucking in. Seemingly assured of his patient's swift recovery, he turned to leave.

"And now your friend is recovered, I'd better set about my original errand and have a word with the driver. However, I'd better make sure the rest of you are healthy." Producing another slab of chocolate, he broke off some chunks and passed them around, making sure everyone else had got some. Once satisfied that everyone was quite well, he turned and with a nod of the head and one last, searching look at Marlie, he left.

The group broke up after that. By this time, the lights had come back on, the train was moving again, and the landscape outside was familiar to all as being the hills just outside Hogsmeade. They'd be there soon. Satisfied that the danger was past, Ginny and her friends said goodbye and returned to their own compartment.

Harry and Luella came to sit next to Deanna, Harry on the seat next to her and Luella kneeling at her feet. Marlie had sat down opposite, staring wistfully out into the corridor, deep in thought. However, none of her friends seemed to notice, being too concerned with Deanna.

"What happened?" Luella was asking. "What did you see?"

Deanna shook her head, still clearly distressed. "I don't know!" she whispered. "I saw my mum lying the ground, and there were all these hooded figures around her. And she was crying and screaming, thrashing around in pain. One of them, I think he was the leader, was casting this hex on her, not sure what it was, I couldn't hear, but it was really hurting her." Deanna caught her breath, obviously not wanting to think about it. "I was so scared!" she whispered.

Harry put his arm around her, clearly deeply affected.

"Hey," he comforted her, "don't! You heard what Lupin said, it happened a long time ago. It's not happening now, you made it, Caitlin made it, it's OK." He squeezed her hand, smiling a little ruefully. "If it's any consolation, I didn't do much better when one came in our compartment. I fell off my seat and I think I fainted, and all I heard was someone screaming. I didn't see my mum getting tortured like you did."

"Thanks," Deanna whispered, squeezing his hand back. Then she realised what he'd said, letting go of his hand and grabbing him by the shoulders. "Hang on, you heard

screaming and blacked out?! My god, Harry, are you alright? Why didn't you tell me?" she cried.

"Didn't get the chance," said Harry. "You were staring off into space and not hearing anything. You seemed to have had it worse than I did."

"I know, but... Harry!" she sighed, before crushing him with a hug. "Anything like that happens again, you tell me, OK?"

"Yes, Deanna. I will," Harry sighed, sincerely doubting that Deanna would actually be in any state to help him if it did. However, it cost nothing to promise, and if it made her feel better...

Luella was going over all that had been said, thinking things over.

"There's just one thing that puzzles me," she said, frowning. "When did it happen? I mean, I've known Caitlin since I was three, and I'm pretty certain nothing like that ever happened to her. Not while she lived in Surrey anyway."

Deanna shook her head. "It wasn't Surrey. Don't know where it was, but it was outside, it was dark, and I'm pretty sure there were mountains. Wherever it was, it was out in the countryside."

"Mountains..." Rianne was sitting bolt upright, inspiration hitting her. "Tyler, when did you move to Surrey? How old were you?"

"Three, I think. Why?"

"You were three and a half," Luella interrupted. "You and Caitlin moved in not long after Christmas 1981. January 1982, it would have been."

"Exactly," Rianne smiled. "Which narrows it down considerably. So we're looking at a traumatic event that Deanna witnessed, that happened between July 1978, when she was born, and January 1982, when she moved to Surrey."

Deanna shook her head. "No good asking me, Ri. I don't remember anything about my life before I came to Surrey. Nothing. Zip. Zilch. Nada. Not a thing. As far as I'm concerned, I may as well have been born there."

"Aha!" Rianne was by now positively beaming. "But you weren't, were you? Come on, Tyler, where did you live before Surrey? Where is it you always boast that your family came from? A place famous for its mountains?" She emphasised the last word particularly forcefully.

"Wales, I suppose, but..." The penny dropped. "Oh! Wales! Duh. It happened when I still lived in Wales! Of course!" Deanna seemed rather proud of herself for working it out, even though Rianne had virtually had to spell it out for her.

Luella had also begun to make a few guesses about what had happened.

"Didn't Professor Lupin say you were three when it happened? 'Old enough to know, young enough not to remember, or not to want to,'" she quoted.

"Exactly," Rianne nodded. "Had to be in Wales, while she was still little - if she'd been older, she would have remembered it. Or to put it another way, she wouldn't have been able to forget."

"No wonder I don't remember anything before Surrey," Deanna whispered. "No wonder, if it meant having to remember *that*!"

"Did any other memories come back to you?" Harry asked, curious despite himself. "Or is it just that one?"

"Just that one," sighed Deanna. "Shame, really, I'd like to know what my early years were like - Mum never really talks about them and there's no pictures anywhere. Not of that part of her life anyway. I mean, there's quite a few of her as a kid and at Hogwarts, and when

she first joined the Aurors, and there's a fair few taken in Surrey, but there's none between the move to Surrey and her getting pregnant. None apart from a few baby photos of me, but you can't really tell much from them."

"No, probably not," murmured Rianne. "And it's understandable really. But we're still no nearer to knowing why your mum was being tortured. After all, she was meant to have spent those years in hiding, wasn't she?"

"Yeah," said Deanna. "We were staying at her mum's house. It was meant to be virtually impregnable to anyone not of our bloodline, unless the Lady admitted them. We left after Voldemort was defeated, but after my gran died, there wasn't a lot left of it. Not sure why - Mum should have inherited it. It shouldn't have collapsed like it did."

Harry, however, was starting to draw a few conclusions. And he wasn't at all sure he liked the way they were pointing. Staying at a house that should have been safe against anything... in hiding from Voldemort... not leaving until his defeat... house now in ruins when it shouldn't be... Caitlin Tyler being tortured some time in the latter half of 1981. In other words, around the time Voldemort was defeated.

"Deanna," he began, "this memory. What time of year was it, do you think? Summer or winter?"

Deanna frowned. "Not sure. There wasn't snow on the ground, so it wasn't winter. Wasn't very warm though. And I think there were trees, but they didn't seem to have leaves."

"Autumn then, you reckon?" Harry asked, his heart pounding. Another bullseye.

"Probably," Deanna nodded.

"Definitely," Rianne interrupted. "Back then, there was only one person who'd have done that to her, and I think we all know who. He bit the dust on Halloween, so it must have been before then, yet not during the summer."

Harry felt his heart skip a beat. He was right, he knew it. Just one final question.

"Deanna," he said carefully, "was there anyone else there? Apart from your mum and those men, that is."

This time, Deanna seemed to be concentrating very hard indeed. "Yeah," she said finally. "Yeah, there was. There were men around us too, with their wands out, but I didn't really notice them. But there was someone else. There was a woman there too, she was holding on to me, trying to stop me wriggling away."

"A woman?" Harry could barely contain himself. "What about her? What do you remember?"

"Not much," she sighed. "She had red hair, I know that much. And she was having trouble holding on to me, I remember that. She was holding another child in her other arm, a little boy, her son I think. I could hear him crying, but wasn't really paying attention, I'm afraid." She smiled apologetically.

"Never mind him," Harry said sharply. "What do you remember about the woman? Did you know who she was?"

Deanna nodded. "Kind of. I knew her, I know that much - she wasn't a stranger. She was trying to protect us, I think she knew my mum." Deanna's brow furrowed as another detail came to mind. "I was shouting at her to let me go, let me go to my mum, but she wouldn't let me. I think," and here she caught her breath, "I think I called her 'Auntie'."

"Auntie?" Luella spoke up, puzzled. "But Caitlin doesn't have any sisters, does she? I always thought she was an only child."

"Yeah. She is," Harry whispered, a lump in his throat. He'd been right. It could only be one night. In fact, if he remembered rightly, Caitlin had actually told him that they'd all been sharing a house the night Voldemort had attacked. Knowing that, there was no need to ask why the house was now in ruins, or what had happened to Caitlin's mother. Or who the mysterious redhaired witch trying to protect him and Deanna had been. Tears prickling at his eyeballs, he looked up. "She was my mum," he whispered.

"Your..." Deanna caught her breath, stunned. And then of course, the penny dropped for all of them as the facts they all should have known some time ago emerged. Caitlin and Deanna had both been there when Voldemort fell - in fact, the Potters had been staying with them at the time. Indeed, they would probably have been his next victims if he hadn't decided to go for Harry first.

"Oh my god," Deanna gasped. "The little boy she was holding... it was you!"

Harry nodded, not trusting himself to say anything. He wasn't at all sure he'd be able to avoid bursting into tears.

"Harry..." Deanna whispered, before flinging her arms round him and pulling him into a hug. Of course, once she'd done that, he could keep his emotional barriers up no longer, and he was soon weeping openly.

"You saw my mum," was all he could say.

"Harry, I'm sorry," Deanna whispered, not knowing what to say. "I only got that glimpse, I don't remember anything else. I'm sorry."

"Not your fault," Harry answered her. "Just that..." And finally the rage he'd had for so long burst out. "Everyone knows more about them than me!" he yelled. "Everyone! Even people who barely knew them, or never loved them! And I'm their son, and I know nothing about them, nothing at all!" He broke down in tears, head resting on Deanna's shoulder. "They're my mum and dad!" he wept. "My mum and dad and I hardly know them! I hardly know them..." He dissolved into tears at this point, weeping helplessly. Rianne and Luella averted their eyes. Harry probably wouldn't appreciate them seeing him cry. Marlie on the other hand appeared to have heard nothing. She was still staring out of the window. However, none of her friends appeared to notice.

At length, Harry stopped crying and dried his eyes. "I'm sorry," he said, his throat ragged with crying. "Didn't mean to... you know."

"Don't worry about it, mate," Deanna said gently, passing him a tissue and ruffling his hair. "I won't say anything if you won't. It's OK to cry - means you care."

Harry nodded as he dried his eyes, still unable to speak. Deanna continued, one arm still round his shoulders.

"Harry, listen. Your mum and my mum were best mates, and when she died, you should have come to us, and from what Mum says, if they'd found your parents' will, you would have done." She took Harry firmly by the shoulders and stared him straight in the eye. "Which as far as I'm concerned, makes you my little brother. So if you ever need me, for any reason at all, either to talk to or assist in the righteous kicking of someone else's arse, and incidentally, I am always ready to hurt Malfoys," here they both shared a knowing grin, "you know where to find me."

"Thanks," whispered Harry, eyes shining. "I will."

They exchanged a look that said more than words ever could, before Rianne interrupted them.

"You'd better head back to your compartment, Harry," she said, glancing out of the window. "I recognise that hill - we'll be there soon."

Harry nodded and, saying goodbye to them all, left to find his friends.

Rianne was soon proved right as Hogsmeade station drew into view, and the events of the journey were, if not forgotten, at least pushed to one side for a while as the scramble to get changed, pack everything away, and generally get ready to disembark

broke out all along the train. Finally, the train came to a halt, for real this time, and the black clad mass of Hogwarts students poured out, swamping the little platform.

"Bloody hell, Rianne!" Luella yelled as she got caught up in the crowd. "Where did all this lot come from? There weren't this many kids here last year, were there?"

"No, there weren't," said Rianne, glaring at them all in a way that suggested she'd finally realised just why Argus Filch hated students so much. "Bloody baby boomers, aren't they?"

"Baby boomers?" Luella asked in confusion, as a particularly unattractive looking new first year bumped into her. "Hey!" she yelled, annoyed. "Watch it, you!"

The first year just poked his tongue out, and disappeared into the melee. Luella glared after him. She too was now beginning to come around to Filch's way of thinking.

"Yeah," Rianne confirmed. "You know You-Know-Who was defeated on Halloween 1981, yeah? Well, a lot of people were very pleased about this, and started celebrating, and when people start celebrating en masse, things usually get a little wild. Not to put too fine a point on it, there was a lot of celebratory shagging, and when people are in that

good a mood, certain essential precautions tend to get forgotten. With me?"

Luella groaned. "Oh lord. Don't tell me. Lots and lots of kids born in July 1982, right?"

"Right. Lots and lots of *magical* kids. Who are all going to turn eleven and start Hogwarts at the same time."

Luella did the necessary maths. Eleven years after 1982 would be...

"Oh Hades."

Rianne nodded thinly, squeezing past a couple of Ravenclaws. "Exactly. They all turned eleven this summer and they're all starting school now. Which is why we couldn't get a compartment to ourselves on the train using ethical means. And why we're going to have an interesting time regarding seating in the Slytherin Common Room this year."

Deanna, who had fought her way forward and was standing behind them, coughed loudly.

"Excuse me," she said, "but *we're* not going to have any problems at all. Others might, but I can personally guarantee there'll be seats available any time I want them."

"Now, now, Deanna," Rianne chided as she dragged them both into a space that had opened up. "I hope you're not going to embark on a campaign of bullying and intimidation targeted at the Slytherin first years."

"Of course not!" Deanna smiled, with a wicked gleam in her eyes. "I'm just going to make one or two examples out of the worst offenders, as a warning to the rest. They'll soon learn." The shine in her eyes ebbed a little. "I hope."

Finally, the crowds began to thin, as the first years headed off to join Hagrid, leaving the rest of the school able to breathe again.

"Well. That was intense," Rianne remarked.

"Tell me about it," Luella sighed. "And to think that is going to be any corridor you care to name every time the bell goes."

Deanna shook her head mournfully. "This year is going to be a nightmare," she sighed. "An absolute nightmare."

"Wonder if we'll see any attacks of corridor rage?" Rianne asked thoughtfully.

Deanna just laughed. "Entirely likely, and it'll probably be me. Come on, let's find Marls, grab a carriage. Now that we're down to sensible, uncrowded student levels again, let's make the most of it."

Marlie was standing near the carriages, talking enthusiastically to her cousins on her father's side, Rachel and Paul Clearwater, twin Ravenclaws.

"Tell you what," Marlie was saying, "I can't thank you guys enough for all the help! First getting those books out of the Restricted Section for me last year, then helping me over the summer... You guys rule!"

"Eh, it was nothing," Rachel shrugged. "Pauly wrote the note in his best handwriting, folded it over so you couldn't read it and then I just gave it to Lockhart asking for an autograph for my mum. Idiot just signed it without even blinking. Can't believe he didn't know our mum's a Muggle," she snickered.

"Yes, and if said mother and our beloved uncle who is also a Muggle are fool enough to take the three of us on a trip to the least magically regulated country in the civilised world, and don't even bother to make sure we've left our wands and books at home, well, how can we resist the opportunity?" Paul smirked.

Marlie grinned and patted the two of them on the shoulders. "How you two missed out on Slytherin, I'll never know. But seriously, thanks!

You've helped a lot, I don't think I could have got anywhere near as far as I have without you!"

"How far's that?" Rachel murmured, lowering her voice. Paul too moved closer in so no one could overhear.

"Almost there," Marlie whispered back. "I was nearly there last time. I think with a bit of effort, and the Hogwarts magical field to draw on, I can do it maybe even the next time I try!"

"Cool!" whispered Rachel, impressed.

"I'll say!" Paul whispered, eyes round. "Let us know if you manage it, OK?"

Marlie nodded. "Will do," she smiled. She turned round as her cousins departed in search of their friends. "Hey folks! You survived then?"

"Barely," Luella groaned. "I'm going to be covered in bruises tomorrow, I just know it. And if I see that ugly looking kid with the pudding basin haircut and freckles again, I shall slap him one."

Marlie looked very thoughtful on hearing this. "Didn't have brown eyes, dark hair and a kinda squashed in nose, did he?"

Luella nodded. "That's him."

"Oh dear," said Marlie, now a little worried. "I think you may have met the latest addition to the Goyle family. Rupert Goyle. A right little troublemaker by all accounts. Draco told me all about him. Apparently, he has, now how did Draco put it? Oh yeah, that's right. 'Insufficient respect for the Malfoy name.'"

"Which means?" asked Luella. The reference was lost on her.

"Well," Marlie explained, "according to Draco, the Goyles have been a vassal family to the Malfoys since Sir Guy married Guinevere, and before. In other words, since the Malfoys began. Their whole reason for being is to serve the Malfoys, do what they tell them and generally act as Malfoy muscle. For any Goyle to show anything less than total respect and subservience to a Malfoy is a family sin requiring extreme penance."

"Let me guess," Rianne grinned. "Little Rupert hasn't quite grasped that yet."

Marlie shook her head. "Nope. Forever being rude to Draco. Keeps calling him a midget."

"Which he is," Deanna pointed out. It had yet to be explained how taller than average parents like Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy could have produced a son like Draco who was so small and slender in build. Inbreeding had been ruled out - Narcissa as a half-blood wasn't related to the Malfoy line in the slightest and Lucius's recent ancestors came from a relatively diverse set of families. It was one of life's eternal mysteries. However, few were fool enough to call the Malfoy heir a runt to his face. Apart, it seemed, from the youngest Goyle.

"Yeah, but Draco Malfoy's not your liege lord, is he?" said Marlie. "In fact, he's your mortal enemy, you're meant to hurl abuse at him."

"Yeah," Deanna grinned as she climbed in to a nearby carriage, "I am, aren't I?"

The other girls climbed in after her and the carriage set off. The short journey to the school proved uneventful, at least until the school gates loomed into view. Arrayed around the borders of the school were more of the sinister Dementors.

Their influence could be felt from some distance, at least by two of the girls. Rianne hissed softly, shutting her eyes.

"Ri?" asked Marlie, squeezing her hand.

Rianne nodded. "Yeah, I'll be fine," she said through gritted teeth, nodding in Deanna's direction. "Check out Tyler."

Luella looked over at Deanna, who was curled up in one corner, her breath coming in ragged gasps, eyes shut tight and hands across her ears.

"Deanna," Luella whispered, putting an arm around her. "Are you OK?"

Deanna just whimpered, although she did not look like she was about to lapse into catatonia again.

"Deanna," Luella whispered. "Deanna, it's OK. Remember what Lupin said - it's in the past, whatever it was. In the past, you're not there now!"

Deanna nodded, seeming to hear her, and as the carriage passed by, the fear seemed to pass. Rianne shook her head and seemed to recover at once, although Deanna spent rather longer shaking.

"I'll never like them," she said with unusual vehemence. "Never."

However, she was recovered well enough by the time they arrived, well enough to walk without fainting anyway.

It seemed that the Dementors had invaded more than one compartment. In fact, judging from all the whispering, the entire train appeared to have been searched.

"Of course, they were looking for Sirius Black, you know," Lydia could be heard declaring to a group of second year Slytherins and Ravenclaws.

"Sirius Black?" The mere mention of his name sent a little shiver round the group.

"But why would he be on the Hogwarts Express?" asked one of the Slytherins, a boy by the name of Clive Warrington.

"Well duh," Ginny could be heard answering, the Slytherin sneer perfected. "He's after Harry Potter, isn't he? You know, the Boy Who Lived. I heard my parents talking about it. Harry put paid to his boss and Sirius Black's glittering career in the bargain. No wonder he wants revenge."

"They say," Lydia added, "that that's why he escaped from Azkaban. Someone left him a copy of the Prophet, and Harry's name was mentioned in it. Apparently, the guards heard him talking in his sleep, saying 'He's at Hogwarts, he's at Hogwarts.' Hence the Dementors all round school."

"That's all we need," sighed Rianne. "Sirius Black stalking Harry. And there I was hoping for a quiet year this year."

"Oh I don't know," Marlie mused. "It could be fun. Not often a mass murderer starts haunting your school."

Luella rolled her eyes. "Unlike last year, where not a single thing out of the ordinary happened at all."

"Give her a break, Lu," Deanna smiled. "She was unconscious for half of it."

"Hey!" snapped Marlie. "I remember last year. I was just saying it could be interesting, that's all."

"Hmm," said Rianne, sceptical. "Well, I had quite enough of interesting last year, and I dare say Deanna and Luella have too."

"Seconded," Luella agreed. "I'm not getting expelled again for anyone!"

"Well then, let's make it official then," Deanna declared. "Let's all promise to behave ourselves and stay out of trouble. Let's have a year where none of us get in trouble, or put ourselves in danger or end up spending half the year in the hospital wing."

"Hey, I didn't ask to be petrified!" Marlie pouted.

"Yes, but you didn't have to go running around the school with a monster on the loose either did you?" Rianne pointed out.

"Suppose," Marlie muttered, still not convinced.

"In that case then, here's to a quiet year!" Deanna announced.

"To a quiet year!" Rianne and Luella responded. Marlie said nothing. Wishing for a quiet year was one thing, but adventure had a way of sneaking up unawares. Besides, she had at least two avenues of interest that looked to be opening up into some very interesting areas indeed...

The four of them began moving towards the school. Up ahead, Professor McGonagall appeared to be shepherding Harry and Hermione away, while Professor Lupin was heading into the Great Hall to join the feast. As the four of them entered the Entrance Hall, another teacher emerged from the shadows: their Head of House, Professor Snape.

He'd been standing there for some time, lurking in the shadows, watching as the students filed past, glaring at anyone who dared to look twice. Unless of course they were in his house, in which case he'd greeted them politely enough. Some of them he'd even shown pleasure at seeing. However, the student he'd been waiting for had yet to arrive. Until now.

Deanna had barely set foot in the building before Snape swooped down on her.

"Miss Tyler," he said stiffly, taking her by the arm. "I need to see you in my office immediately."

Deanna exchanged glances with her friends. "Er... why?" This seemed more than a little worrying. Her normally calm and self-controlled House Head was shaking all over, and he seemed to have taken pale to a whole new level.

"I'll explain later. If you please, Miss Tyler?" he said, his voice tight, as if some emotion was threatening to break through. Deanna couldn't tell what it was though. Anger? Annoyance? Something else? Difficult to tell. However, she'd seen him angry before, and he hadn't been acting like this. It was a mystery. Still, if she wanted to solve it, the only way seemed to be by going with him.

"OK," she sighed. "See you guys at the feast." Turning, she followed the professor out.

Luella watched them go, a frown on her face.

"What was all that about?" she asked, addressing no one in particular.

"The Dementors," said Rianne. "I could see it in his aura - he was worried sick about Deanna. Someone must have told him what happened on the train."

"Of course," sighed Luella. That did explain things. Deanna didn't know it, but Professor Snape wasn't just her teacher, he was also her father, and most attached to his little girl. No wonder he looked the way he had. Luella fervently hoped that the Ministry weren't too attached to their Dementors. Because if there was a potion, or indeed any other kind of magic, capable of destroying them, Professor Severus Snape would almost certainly be looking into it.

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Deanna had to run to keep up with her teacher as he strode down the corridor. He was proceeding at an extremely fast pace, and although she was no longer the undersized child she'd once been, she was still a lot shorter than her six foot tall Potions Professor.

"Professor, wait up!" she gasped. He stopped, allowing her to catch up with him, but did not say anything. Instead, he began walking again, albeit at a slower pace. He did not speak to her though, not until they'd reached the privacy of his office.

Deanna went in, not sure what to expect as he closed the door behind her.

"Sir?" she began, turning to face him. She did not get the chance to finish. As soon as the door had closed, Snape had covered the distance between them and pulled her to him, cradling her next to him with a surprising and not a little disturbing ferocity.

"Thank the gods," he whispered. "Thank every god in Heaven, Hades and the Middle Realm." Seeming to recollect himself a little, he let her go, only retaining a grip on her shoulders.

"Sir, are you alright?" Deanna asked, wondering if perhaps all the mercury and sulphur fumes ingested over the years had finally gone to her Potions professor's head.

"Yes, I... I'm fine," he said, still staring at her. "I just..." He steadied himself, drawing a deep breath. "I heard about what happened on the

train, Deanna." He smiled at her, but there was sadness in his eyes. "For one horrible moment, I thought I'd lost you."

Of course, Deanna realised. Professor Lupin must have owed the school, and the news would certainly have been passed on to her House Head.

"Sir, I'm OK," she reassured him. "Really! Yeah, it was bad for a while, but Professor Lupin brought me out of it, and as long as I stay away from Dementors, I'm going to be fine."

Snape let her go, his eyes darkening at the mention of Lupin's name.

"So I heard," he said abruptly. "Another favour owed, as if I couldn't have treated you myself when you got here..." He swiftly changed the subject, as if not wishing to dwell on that topic any longer than he had to. Deanna was not slow to notice it. Wonderful, she thought. Snape owes Lupin a favour and hates being in his debt. They're not going to be at each other's throats at all, are they? She made a mental note not to refer to either professor in front of the other one if she could help it.

"They'll have to go, of course," said Snape, snapping Deanna back to full attention. What was going to have to go?

"We've already had one collapse, and a serious one at that," Snape continued. "There'll certainly be others, and I don't want that happening to you again. I'll owl Melissa and your mother tonight, ask to have them removed. I'm sure this place is safe enough against Black, and in any case, I'd far rather have Aurors here. They know what they're doing, and can tell a child from an escaped convict."

Deanna realised with a shock that he was talking about having the Dementors removed. Dislike them as she did, the thought appalled her.

"You can't do that!" she burst out. "Not on my account, please!"

Snape looked startled. "Why not on your account?" he asked.

"Because everyone'll know!" Deanna moaned. "Everyone'll know I can't stand up to Dementors! They'll think I'm delicate and fragile and too sensitive to deal with anything dangerous! They'll think I'm a wuss!" She glared at him, meaning business. Too many people had witnessed the incident on the train as it was, and she couldn't rely on them all to keep quiet.

Snape looked back at her, exasperated, although part of him couldn't help laughing at her adolescent pride. Teenagers, they were all the same.

"I very much doubt anyone'll think you're a wuss," he said gently. "But if you insist, I'll refrain from requesting that they're removed immediately. I'll still have to inform your mother though."

"You don't have to do that," said Deanna quickly. That was all she needed, her mother finding out that the heiress she expected to turn out as the consummate warrior had collapsed at her first real challenge.

"Deanna," said Snape, and his voice told her that there was no arguing on this score, "she's your mother. It's my professional duty to tell her - she'll want to know. She'll be worried about you, as are we all."

"Exactly!" Deanna protested. "What she doesn't know about, won't worry her!"

"What and you don't think she'll find out somehow?" Snape asked. "You don't think the Headmaster won't be on to the Ministry about this? She'll hear about it sooner or later, and personally I think she'll worry far less if I tell her about it and do my best to minimise the incident and assure her of your wellbeing. Deanna, don't be afraid of making her worry. She's your mother, it's what they do."

Deanna subsided, resigned to the inevitable. She could only hope that if they did withdraw the Dementors, Melissa or her mother would have the sense and diplomacy to play it as an institutional decision rather than a personal one.

"In the mean time," Snape continued, "we'll just have to make sure you avoid the Dementors as far as possible, a task made abundantly easier by the fact that you're not going to Hogsmeade this year."

Deanna groaned inwardly. She'd forgotten about that. Damn her mother.

"Sir," she pleaded. "Can't you overrule her? I mean, you could give me permission, couldn't you?"

"No, Deanna, I could not. She's your parent and legal guardian. I am merely your teacher, with neither the power or authority to make that sort of decision without her consent."

"Yeah," said Deanna, upping the charm, "but she likes you. If you wrote to her and told her you really didn't think there was any danger, I'm sure she would listen to you."

"Deanna!" Snape thundered. "If your mother says that you are to remain on campus this year, then remain on campus you shall, and neither god, mage or Muggle shall command it otherwise! Do you understand me?"

"OK!" Deanna squeaked, shaken. She wasn't at all used to seeing Snape assert his full authority like that - normally a subtle hint was enough to quell any student.

"Glad to hear it," he said curtly. He checked his watch and got to his feet, his attitude softening a little in a tacit apology for frightening her. "Come on, let's get you to the

feast. The Sorting must be virtually done by now, they'll be on to the new prefects soon and I need to be there for the Slytherins."

That got Deanna's attention. "Hey, the new prefects are in my year this time, aren't they?" she asked as she followed him out.

"They are," Snape confirmed.

"You must know who the Slytherins are then."

"Of course. I nominated them all, and was present at the staff meeting when we voted for them."

"So, are you going to give me any names then?" Deanna pressed him, her confidence restored. The patriarchal authoritarian seemed to have passed, and Snape seemed to be once more the indulgent, if reserved, mentor that all the Slytherins knew him to be. "Ri's one surely, isn't she? And Lucas too, he has to be. Come on, how about a hint? Please?"

Snape raised a hand as he led her into the corridor. "Patience, dear child. I will of course tell you all of them." He fixed her with a sly grin. "When we're at the feast, with everyone else."

Deanna groaned. "Oh for gods' sake. Come on, just one of them!"

"No."

"Alright then, how about a clue? You could mime it. How many syllables?"

"Deanna, if you think we are playing charades in the middle of the corridor, you are quite wrong."

"What about a hint?"

"No."

"A nudge?"

"No."

"Not even an inkling?" Deanna pleaded, fluttering her eyelashes in a most Marlie-esque manner.

"No," said Snape firmly. However, he seemed to be considering something, and sure enough he relented a little. "Oh, very well. Just a

small warning. All I will say is, be prepared for a surprise. There is one name in there you will not expect at all."

"You've never made Marlie a prefect!" Deanna gasped. Snape merely turned away with a smile, refusing to answer.

"You can't just leave it at that!" Deanna cried. "You've got to tell me now!"

However, he didn't. Despite Deanna's protestations, he revealed nothing more to her, and when they reached the feast, she was none the wiser. However, she had her theories, and after saying goodbye to Snape at the Great Hall, raced to the Slytherin table to share them.

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Chapter Seven Dangerous Liaisons

Deanna slipped unnoticed into the Great Hall just as the Sorting had finished. She took a seat next to Luella, noting as she did so that her friends were looking unusually downcast.

"What's up, folks?" she asked.

Luella shot a particularly venomous glance at the new first years, who had already formed a little pack. "Them," she hissed viciously.

Deanna looked and felt her heart sink as she recognised Rupert Goyle. "Gaia," she muttered. "I hate him already."

"He's formed a clique," said Rianne wearily. "He's teamed up with Camilla Crabbe, Ramon Macnair, Daisy Parkinson, Ancalime Summerisle, Duncan Blackadder, Gawain Moody, Cecil Figg, Bethany

Abbott, Mordred Macbeth, and a pair of Muggle-born twins called Darren and David Kray."

"Muggle-borns?" Deanna asked, surprised. Although the Abbotts, Figgs, Blackadders, Summerisles and Moodys were generally friendly or neutral to Muggle-borns, the Crabbes, Goyles and Parkinsons were not, and their children appeared to be the leaders.

"We think they're related to some notorious East End criminal overlords," Luella explained. "I heard that there was some sort of fight on the train, and they've come to an understanding. Now they're fitting right in."

"We're not sure yet which of the two Macnair brothers Ramon's the son of yet," Marlie chimed in. "Denethor's OK, he works for my mum. But Walden was linked to Voldie, although nothing was ever proved."

"And Ancalime Summerisle's old blood," Luella added. "Rianne reckons that family are older than yours."

"Bethany Abbott is also the sole Slytherin in a largely Hufflepuff family," said Rianne. "It'll be interesting to see how she turns out."

"Mordred Macbeth gets me," said Deanna, recalling an old family superstition. "They've mixed two Celtic styles there. Welsh forename, Scottish surname." She

shook her head in dismay. "A sign of certain disaster." She glanced around to see if there were any other first years around. "Is that it, or are there any nice firsties around?"

"There's Lucretia Zabini, Aradia Lovecraft, Tamsin Bulstrode and Miranda Coulter," Rianne listed them one by one. "Zabini and Bulstrode are probably OK, but Zabini looks very easily led and Bulstrode's more than capable of violence if provoked. The Coulters

have been linked with dark magic since the early 1800s, and the Lovecraft family are rumoured to be worshippers of Cthulhu. Those are the main names. There's also three terrified Muggle-borns, one of whom is Chris Bryant's little sister Cathy."

"In other words, they're going to make our lives hell," Luella finished. "Perfect timing, I might add. No sooner do we come to some kind of arrangement with Malfoy and friends than their little sibs arrived to terrorise us. I feel sorry for whoever gets made prefect this year, they'll have their work cut out for them." She shot a grin at Rianne.

"I'm sure I'll manage," said Rianne. "After all, it could be worse. We've got the fewest first years, I reckon. Some of the other houses have forty or fifty new kids."

Deanna looked at the other tables. Sure enough, they were even more crowded than the Slytherin table. The Gryffindor table in particular looked as if a riot were about to break out.

"Poor old Harry," she murmured. At that moment, Professor Sprout, who'd been reading out the names of the new Hufflepuff prefects, sat down and the noise level seemed to double. Deanna suddenly remembered what Snape had told her, and decided now was the time to have a little fun.

"Hey, guess what," she whispered. "I was asking Snape about the new prefects, and he let slip a few hints."

That got their attention.

"Really?" Rianne asked, all ears. "Who are they?"

"Am I one?" asked Luella, a slightly nervous look in her eyes.

"Well," said Deanna with a grin, "I didn't find out about them all. But I did find this out. Marls is one."

"WHAT???" Marlie shrieked, her voice echoing around the room as all eyes turned to look at her. Suddenly realising she was being glared at by half the room, she ducked guiltily away and lowered her voice.

"I can't be!" she wept. "I can't be a prefect! I'm far too badly behaved and irresponsible. Snape finds me irritating and banal! I'm the only one in the year who ends each year in the minuses pointwise. I'm a D average, an appalling example to younger students, and by Aphrodite,

I'm proud of it! And he nominates me as prefect!" She shook her head in disbelief. "My life is over," she whispered, horrified.

Next to her, Mike Lovegood, her older brother, turned to look, having overheard her and not quite able to believe it himself.

"You? Prefect?" He was staring at her as if she'd grown an extra head. "Am I hearing things?"

Marlie shook her head, still tearful. "Deanna says Snape's made me a prefect!" she whimpered.

Mike did not look convinced. "I very much doubt it."

"Suppose he has?" said Marlie desperately. "I mean, suppose Mum's paid him or something. Or suppose he needs me to make up the numbers!"

"Marls," said Mike patiently. "He only needs one girl per year. He's already got Rianne. He doesn't need any more, and he's certainly not going to give it to you, not when you also have Lu Martin, co-saviour of the school last year, and Deanna Tyler, the most terrifying individual in the house, to choose from. No offence, kid, but you'd be hopeless."

"Mum didn't have a word, did she?" Marlie asked nervously. Mike shook his head with a grin.

"Nah. Heard her telling Dad not to get his hopes up. She's of the opinion that if there's going to be a Head Student in our family, it'll be me."

"Reckon you'll do it?" asked Kat Stormosi on his other side, eyes already aglow at the thought of being the Head Boy's girlfriend.

"Don't see why not," Mike grinned. "Not much competition, after all. Mum reckons I've got every chance. She really wants me to do it too - she always wanted to be Head Girl, but never got the chance."

Mike and Kat turned their attention back to the Prefect announcements. Flitwick had just finished announcing the new Ravenclaw prefects, and McGonagall was starting the Gryffindor list.

Next to Rianne, Lucas Vetinari was making his presence felt.

"Sorry to interrupt you ladies, but did I hear you right? Is Marlie really going to be a prefect?"

"Very possibly," said Luella. "Deanna reckons Snape hinted that Marlie was one of them."

Lucas raised an eyebrow. "Is that so? Interesting. Very interesting. That won't please Chris and Geoff - they're running a book on this." Sure enough, next to him, Chris Bryant and Geoff Foxworth were frantically doing calculations on a bit of parchment. Some of the figures looked rather like bookmaker's odds.

Rianne glanced over. "Anyone put money on Marlie?"

"One or two people did. Ginny Weasley placed one out of sympathy."

"It won't be her," said Rianne instantly. "Marls, dry your eyes, you're perfectly safe. Four years of slacking weren't in vain after all."

"Woohoo!" yelled Marlie, jumping up. Fortunately for her, she was drowned out by the sound of cheering Gryffindors as Lee Jordan's name was announced.

"Filler," said all the Slytherins at once.

"Now that, sis, is a prefect you create to make up the numbers," said Mike. Marlie made no reply. She was just happy to have avoided enforced reliability.

At length, McGonagall concluded the list and took her seat. Fred and George Weasley were not prefects, to no one's surprise. Finally, Snape got to his feet.

"Ooh! Here we go!" Marlie squeaked. "Good luck, everyone!"

Luella looked at Deanna. "Now, is she wishing us luck in getting badges or not getting them?"

Deanna looked at Marlie carefully. "Difficult to tell. Suppose it depends if she placed any bets in the Bryant and Foxworth gambling ring."

"Suppose," Luella nodded. Snape began to speak.

"Here are the new fifth year prefects for Slytherin House. I shall read them out in age order, starting with the oldest." He paused with a smile, allowing the assembled Slytherins to start working out who was born when.

"Oh for Hecate's sake!" Marlie hissed. "Why can't he go alphabetically like everyone else?"

"Because he's a sadist," said Rianne, reaching for a quill. "Right, I'm in October, Lucas in January, Lu in June, Tyler in July, Marls in November. Everyone else?"

"Alex in March, Winter in December, Geoff in February, Chris in May," Lucas told her.

"Which makes it me, Marls, Winter, you, Geoff, Alex, Chris, Lu and Deanna. We're set." She gave Snape an imperceptible nod and he began.

"The first prefect is Miss Rianne Stormosi."

"Yeah, baby!" yelled Rianne as a silver badge materialised in front of her. "Come to me, you little silver beauty, you!" She snatched it up and pinned it on as everyone congratulated her.

"The second prefect is Mr. Winter Montague."

The said Mr. Montague immediately had a choking fit and had to be repeatedly thumped on the back before he could pick his badge up.

"Safe!" sighed Marlie. "See, Tyler? Nothing to worry about."

Deanna was frowning. While she hadn't seriously thought it'd be Marlie, that did leave the question - what surprise had Snape meant? Nothing too out of the ordinary had occurred so far.

Snape waited until the general hubbub had calmed down before moving on to the next on the list.

"Mr. Lucas Vetinari."

"Who else?" murmured the self-styled Fifth Year's Mr. Cool as he reached for his own badge. Rianne gave him a hug and the two new prefects exchanged smiles.

"Miss Luella Martin," Snape announced, smiling most uncharacteristically.

"No WAY!" Luella shrieked as the badge appeared. "Oh my god! This is unbelievable! Wait till Mum and Dad hear this!"

"Congratulations!" yelled Rianne.

"Well done, Lu!" Marlie grinned.

Deanna immediately hugged her friend. "That must have been the surprise!" she laughed. "Lu, that's great, you must be so pleased!"

Luella nodded, smiling. "Yeah, it is! I honestly had no idea they'd pick me, I mean, not with my disciplinary record and all."

"Maybe it's Hogwarts' way of saying sorry for wrongfully expelling you," Rianne put in.

"Maybe." Luella turned to look at Snape with a smile. "Or maybe not."

Snape smiled back before coughing, in an attempt to get everyone's attention. Lucas looked up at him, frowning.

"What's he doing, isn't that it? Lu's birthday's in June, that's right near the end of the year."

Rianne looked at her list, eight names now marked off with either a tick or a cross. "Not right at the end of the year," she said softly.

Across the table, Deanna let Luella go, realising with a shock that there was one more birthday in their year. Hers.

"Oh no. No way," she whispered. Say it isn't so, Professor. Say it isn't so!

She was to be disappointed. Smirking, Snape began to read once more.

"The final Slytherin prefect for this year is Miss Deanna Tyler. And that concludes the new appointments for this academic year."

His final words were drowned out by half the table erupting. Deanna found herself getting hugged and patted on the back by Slytherins she barely knew. In a daze, she let Luella fling her arms around her, accepted Mike Lovegood's handshake, smiled vaguely as Lucas and Rianne both yelled congratulations at her. Even Malfoy, further up the table, could be seen smiling and raising his glass to her. That disconcerted her more than the silver Slytherin crest now lying in front of her.

"Gonna put it on?" asked Rianne.

"I, er, yeah, I guess so," said Deanna, somehow managing to string a sentence together.

"She's still in shock," Luella smiled, picking the badge up. "Allow me." Positioning it carefully, she pressed it against Deanna's robes, where it immediately attached itself to the material. Prefect badges at Hogwarts were enchanted so that once accepted, they automatically transferred to whatever school robes the holder was wearing at the time. Once on, it didn't come off.

Deanna looked down at it, twinkling away innocuously. She was stuck with it now. It would be there for the next three years, marking her out

as an authority figure. She wasn't sure whether that was a good thing or not. For her or for anyone else. Still, Snape seemed to think she could do it, and she didn't want to let him down. She'd come a long way from the first year who'd complained at ending up with Satan as her house head.

She locked eyes with Marlie, who was staring at it in undisguised horror.

"Marls?" she asked, worried. "You OK?"

"Me?" Marlie shook herself out of it, smiling weakly. "Oh, er, yeah, I'm fine, don't worry. I was just surprised, that's all. I mean, you, a prefect. I never thought of you as a disciplinarian."

"What?" exclaimed Rianne. "Half the school's scared of her!"

"Nah, that's just because she's a dictatorial thug," Marlie grinned. "But discipline...! Having to apply rules and stuff, as opposed to just kicking people in the shins because they've breathed in the wrong way. Sure you can manage it?"

"Sure I can," Deanna nodded. She noticed Rianne and Lucas sniggering. "What?"

"You do know you can't hex wrongdoers, don't you?" said Lucas.

"Or beat them up," added Rianne. "And as for flushing their heads down the toilet, that one's right out."

Quite a bit of mirth seemed to accompany that remark. Deanna glared at them all. "Will you lot stop it? I'm sure I'll be fine. After all, half the school is scared of me, with any luck, a glare or a raised eyebrow will do the job."

"And if it doesn't?" Luella asked.

"If that doesn't work, I'll have to use my secret weapon."

"Which is?" Marlie asked.

Deanna just smiled serenely. "Sarcasm."

At that point, the Great Hall fell silent. Dumbledore had got to his feet, with the Goblet of Fire in front of him. It was time to select the new Head Students for the coming year.

As was the custom, Dumbledore went through the ritual for the benefit of first years and those who'd slept through previous Choosings. The names of all the seventh year prefects had been written down and placed in the Goblet, and now it was ready to produce the two who would be Head Boy and Head Girl for that year. The whole room held its breath in silence. Well, almost the whole room.

"This is it," Mike Lovegood could be heard muttering. "The big moment. Ten minutes from now, Kat, and you'll be dating the new Head Boy."

Kat grinned, squeezing his hand. On his other side, Marlie patted him on the shoulder.

"Good luck, Mikey!" she whispered.

Everything went quiet. The Goblet blazed away. Then, the flames turned from blue to red, and a piece of parchment shot out of it. Dumbledore caught it and examined it carefully.

"And the name of this year's Head Girl, from Slytherin House, is Miss Laetitia Vetinari!"

The table erupted as the newly chosen Head Girl found herself mobbed.

"Go sis!" Lucas could be heard yelling, while at the other end of the table, Lydia Vetinari could be seen cheering along with Ginny Weasley and Autumn Montague.

"Nice one, Tisha!" Rianne yelled. Laetitia, Lucas's older sister, smiled at them, her silver prefect badge having magically turned into a golden badge shaped like the Hogwarts crest.

"I want one," said Rianne, pouting.

"Give it time, Ri, you only just got the silver one," Lucas teased her.

Dumbledore coughed, bringing the room to attention. "If I may have your attention please. I believe the Goblet's ready to choose the Head Boy for this year."

The Slytherin table immediately fell silent. It was noted by many of the more observant Slytherins that their table was the only one which had done so, or which had needed to do so.

"After all the trouble I went to last year, they still hate us?" Luella murmured under her breath. "What do I have to do, really die?"

The Goblet flared again as she spoke, and moments later had sent another bit of parchment to join the first. Dumbledore caught it, read it, and began to smile. Luella noticed that and sighed. She motioned to Rianne.

"Is it Mike?"

Rianne concentrated and frowned, before shaking her head. She'd seen the smile too.

"The name of this year's Head Boy," Dumbledore announced, "from Gryffindor House, is Percy Weasley."

This time, no less than three tables started cheering. The Gryffindors went mad, but that was to be expected. The Ravenclaws were also rather pleased - Percy was seeing one of their number, Luella's cousin Penelope Clearwater. What was more surprising, or possibly less, depending on how cynical you were, was the sight of the Hufflepuffs applauding.

"Bastards," Marlie glared. She turned to her brother, who was less than pleased.

"Percy Weasley??" Mike fumed, thumping the table. "That little geek?"

"He's the same height as you," Marlie pointed out.

"He's a lanky, ginger, four-eyed tosser!" Mike exploded. "Look at him! I mean, who on earth would look twice at him?"

"My cousin did," Luella pointed out.

"Well, yeah, OK, she did," Mike admitted, "but anyone can get one person to fancy them. It takes something else to get the entire school to respect you, and he hasn't got it. I mean, honestly, who'd pick that freckle-faced nerd over me?"

"The three tables busy cheering him?" Kat asked, a tad annoyed that she wasn't dating the Head Boy after all.

"Kat!" Mike moaned. "You're meant to be consoling me!"

"Yes, of course," she coughed. "My poor baby. Never mind, being Head Boy's overrated anyway. When you're a famous Quidditch star and he's at a boring desk job at the Ministry, you'll look back and laugh at this moment. Plus your girlfriend's a lot better-" She stopped as she noticed Luella glaring at her. "At Quidditch," she finished hastily. "A lot better at Quidditch." She smiled insincerely.

Luella turned away, deciding to let that go for now. It was enough to know that Kat Stormosi wasn't prepared to insult a relative to her face. She fingered her prefect badge with a smile. Despite a Gryffindor Head Boy, things were on the up. She glanced at the first years with a sigh. Now if only she could assert her new status over that lot...

Mike was still giving vent to his feelings, although he was now more disappointed than anything.

"Don't know how I'm going break this to Mum - she had her heart set on me being Head Boy. Gonna be even worse now that Tisha's Head Girl. Apparently her dad's always hassling her at work about this and that. How's it going to be for her now that his daughter's Head Girl and

his son a prefect, and neither of her kids are going to be Head Students at all?"

"Don't say that, there's still Mar-" Kat stopped, noticing the distinct lack of a badge on Marlie's uniform. "Ah. Forgot. Sorry." She turned back to comforting her boyfriend. "Look, don't let it get to you. She's an Auror and Department Head, I'm sure she'll cope. I'm sure she's had worse things happen."

"I know," said Mike unhappily. "But it would have made her day, you know? She hasn't got illustrious ancestors like most of this lot has, and she didn't marry an aristocrat like my aunt did. All she's got is what we all do, and now I missed out on the big one."

"Hey," Kat soothed him. "It'll be OK. There'll be bigger and better things than this, at least I hope so! You're going to go on and really do something with your life, I know you will, while he's going to be stuck behind a desk doing something really, really dull. Just you wait."

Marlie turned away as her brother, apparently cheered up by that thought, pulled Kat closer for a kiss. She stared at the plate in front of her, hardly listening to Dumbledore's announcements regarding the Dementors, and new teachers. She'd already noticed that Professor Lupin had disappeared, and she wasn't afraid of Dementors now. Mike's words had stuck in her head. That was it now, there'd never be a Lovegood Head Student, not until she and Mike had kids of their own, and it'd be too late for her mother then. She began to regret the four years of slacking. If she'd been made a prefect, at least her mum would have something to be pleased about, plus there'd be a slim chance of her being Head Girl one day. Not now. Marlie looked at her friends, all admiring their prefect badges. Luella and Rianne both looked thrilled to have theirs, and even Deanna seemed to be getting used to the idea. Marlie felt her heart sink even further. There went her main partner in crime. No more syndicate or sweepstake - she couldn't run them on her own. She'd have to offload them. Draco could have the sweepstake, and Ginny could have the syndicate - she needed the

money more, and she was more popular outside Slytherin than Draco. Great. There went two more cool things in her life.

Dumbledore finished talking and the feast began. Marlie barely picked at her food. Fifth year had only just started, and already things were looking grim. No first team Quidditch position, no family prestige, no scamming partner, and no badge. Not that she'd really wanted one, but it galled her to know that she was the only one in her dorm without one.

I need an adventure, the thought came unbidden. A real adventure, like Luella and Deanna seemed to get every year. Yes, there'd been her Sleeping Death trance, but that had been a long time ago. Nothing had happened second year, and third year was one she'd rather forget. Fourth year had been interesting, but again, she'd ended up missing out on the good bits thanks to a basilisk and a diary from hell. Somehow, it always seemed to be someone else in the limelight. Well, not this time. This year, she was going to see if she couldn't have an adventure all on her own.

She watched the pendulum swing with baited breath. Left and right, left and right. It hadn't stabilised yet. She wasn't at all sure she wanted it to. The way it swung could decide her whole future.

She shut her eyes. "Is it working yet?" she demanded.

"Difficult to tell," a female voice answered. "Someone appears to be interfering with the swing! Honestly Caitlin, do you want to go ahead with this or not?"

Caitlin Tyler opened her eyes again. Her mother, Medea, was glaring at her with her usual patience.

"Sorry, Mum," she said sheepishly. "I'm just... I mean..." She gathered her wits. "I'm frightened!"

Medea lowered the pendulum. It wasn't exactly the most elaborate magical item ever, consisting of her wedding ring on a length of cotton. However, it would work well enough. That is, if Caitlin didn't stop magically interfering with it.

"Caitlin bach," said Medea tenderly. "We don't have to do this, you know. If you're that scared, I could just make you an Abortion Potion and get it over with."

"No!" Caitlin snapped. "I can't risk it. I can't risk killing the future Heiress of Tal-y-Rhys."

"You're not killing anything!" Medea cried, exasperated. "Darling, we've been through this. What happened to you was a terrible thing, the worst any woman should have to endure. You didn't ask to get pregnant. You certainly don't deserve to have a child you don't want inflicted on you. And you aren't even thirty yet - you have plenty of time to find yourself a nice man and have a child or two with him. Caitlin, it won't have a father, not even a dead one. One day it'll start asking questions. When it does, will you be ready to answer them? What will you say? And how do you think it's going

to feel when you do? Caitlin, how do you think that child is going to feel knowing that it only came into being because its father brutally raped its mother?"

"I'll deal with it!" Caitlin screamed, putting her hands over her ears. "I'll deal with it when it comes!"

"Oh really." Medea folded her arms, unimpressed. "Well, deal with this, Caitlin. Suppose that child looks like its father? Could you deal with that? Seeing the face of the man who raped you adorning your beloved Heiress every day for the rest of your life??"

"Stop it!" Caitlin sobbed. "Stop it, stop it, stop it! Stop it, please, Mum! Please..." She burst into tears.

Sighing, Medea put her arms around her daughter, feeling twinges of guilt at making her cry. She hadn't meant to be quite that hard on her.

And yet it needed to be said. Caitlin was going to have to deal with these issues sooner or later.

Finally, Caitlin's tears subsided. Looking up at her mother, she came to a decision.

"Listen, Mum," she said firmly. "I meant it earlier. I am not going to be some brood mare churning out sons for those bastards. If they want sex slaves to bend over for them and give them their precious sons, they can find some other women, because the Heiress of Tal-y-Rhys belongs to no one! I'm bringing no son of a Death Eater into the world." Here she smiled, a cold, malicious smile of sheer hatred. "But a girl-child is mine and mine alone, my Heiress, a princess of Tal-y-Rhys. She needs no father to give her status, you know that as well as I do. She'll have it from the day she's born. She'll be powerful, Mum, as powerful as any Death Eater, yet bitterly opposed to them and everything they stand for. She'll take the fight to them, and they'll fall at her feet. That's what my daughter will be, Mum! The instrument of my revenge. And what better revenge could there be than having the bastard who did this to me meet his end looking straight into the eyes of his own child?"

Medea began to smile. This was more like it. This was more like the Heiress she'd given birth to and raised. "Clever," she said softly. "Very clever. I like it."

Caitlin lowered her eyes to her still deceptively flat stomach. She ran a hand over it, biting her lip. "If I can salvage something good out of this, I will," she said softly. "After all, why should my future Heiress have to die because of what her father did?"

"Better find out if it is an Heiress first," said Medea, gathering her pendulum. "Lie down then, love, let's get on with it."

Caitlin nodded and lay down, closing her eyes, realising that she simply could not bear to watch the ring moving, whether deosil or widdershins.

"Deosil for a boy, widdershins for a girl," said Medea softly as she suspended the ring above her daughter's stomach. "Show me!"

The ring started to move, this time with no interference from Caitlin. It swung this way and that for a few moments before finally settling in one direction. Widdershins.

"It's a girl," Medea breathed. Caitlin's eyes shot open.

"What?" she gasped, staring at the ring. No doubt. It was swinging steadily anticlockwise. "Oh Hera," Caitlin whispered, sitting up. She stared at her mother before bursting into tears again.

"Oh gods," she howled. "No, no, no!"

Medea once more took the girl into her arms, wondering how on earth she was going to cope with nine months of this as Caitlin sobbed on her shoulder.

"I can't do it," she whispered. "Can't handle this! I'm too young to be a mum, not on my own, not like this!" She starting crying again.

"Caitlin," Medea whispered, soothing her as best she could. "Caitlin bach, don't cry! Don't cry!" She switched to Welsh, their mutual mother tongue, crooning over her tenderly as if to a child. It seemed to work, because Caitlin's tears soon subsided.

"I'm scared," she whispered. "I'm so scared!"

"It'll be alright, Caitlin," Medea whispered. "It'll be alright!"

"My little girl," Caitlin whispered. "How is she going to cope? How is she going to manage, knowing where she came from? My little girl, Mum!" Caitlin started crying.

"She'll cope," said Medea fiercely. "She will! She'll be your girl, Caitie. She'll be strong, very strong. Like you. Like me. Like all the Tal-y-Rhys before her."

"I don't feel strong," Caitlin whispered.

Medea gave her a hug. "You underestimate yourself, darling," she said. "What you've had to go through... This would have broken a lot of women. It hasn't broken you yet."

"Give it time," Caitlin whispered.

"Hey," Medea scolded. "Less of that!" She held Caitlin at arms length, looking her straight in the eyes. "Listen, cariad. You're going to have this baby. And you're going to be the best mother it could possibly have. And she's going to be beautiful, and strong, and brave, and powerful, just like her mother. And she's going to have a mam, and a grandmam who love her very much, and she's going to have lots of devoted aunts and uncles who think the world of her. And Castell y Tal-y-Rhys'll be her home, and she'll grow up to be a mighty warrior-princess for the forces of good." Medea smiled again. "Just like her mam."

Caitlin smiled through her tears. It could work. It could. It'd be OK. Smiling, she embraced her mother.

And then the dream-memory turned to nightmare, as it always did, as it had done every night these past weeks.

"And me, Caitlin," came an all-too familiar man's voice from the doorway. "Don't forget me."

Caitlin broke away and gasped to see the silhouette of a man standing there, swathed in darkness. Medea turned around to see who it was, but she never finished the manoeuvre. The figure in the doorway raised his wand and said two simple words. "Avada Kedavra." The green curse hit her full on, and Caitlin could only watch in horror as her mother slumped to the floor, her golden brown hair lying spread out on the floor, fierce blue eyes now forever sightless.

"No!" she screamed. "Mum, don't leave me, I need you!"

"You don't need her," said her killer as he stepped into the room, an imposing sight in his Doc Martens, leather trousers, white vest, tattooed arms and a sinister smile on what would otherwise be quite a handsome face. "I'm here now. I'll look after you. You don't have to worry any more."

Caitlin backed away, sobbing as he emerged into the light. Then grief turned into terror as she saw what he held in his other hand. It was a twisted wire coat hanger.

Caitlin woke up with a cry, before remembering where she was. Safe, safe at home, in her own bed. She'd come home from work, and been so tired, she'd come upstairs and collapsed on the bed without even bothering to undress. She'd only meant to rest for a bit, but somehow she'd fallen asleep, without having taken her Dreamless Sleep potion. She shivered, the horrible memory of Medea lying dead still raw in her mind.

"Mum," she whispered, fighting the urge to be sick. "Oh gods." She really wished she'd taken Dreamless Sleep. Ever since he'd escaped, every single night, she'd had to watch him murder her mother, over and over and over again. That was when she managed to sleep at all. Damn the treacherous, murdering bastard.

It occurred to Caitlin that taking Dreamless Sleep wasn't the only thing she'd forgotten to do. She'd also neglected to carry out the usual security checks when she got in. Swearing under her breath, she reached for her wand.

A noise behind her stopped her. Caitlin spun round, her heart pounding. No one there, although Caitlin could have sworn she'd seen movement out of the corner of her eye. Shrugging, she turned back, sitting upright and swinging her legs out of bed. She felt for her wand, on the bedside table where she'd left it.

It wasn't there. Caitlin's eyes widened. She was sure she'd left it there. Unless it had rolled down the side or something, but that had never happened before. Leaning over, she peered into the gap between the cabinet and bed.

Before she could even react, someone grabbed her from behind, pulling her back, pinning her arms to her sides and pointing her own wand at her throat.

"Get off me!" she yelled, too shocked to be frightened. At least, that was until he spoke.

"What's the matter, Caitlin? Not happy playing the sub for once?"

Modron Duwies, if you have ever loved me... Caitlin prayed desperately, the sudden fear forcing her straight back to the Welsh mother goddess of her childhood. She couldn't see her attacker, but that didn't matter. She knew him far too well. It was Sirius Black.

How the hell did he get in? was her next thought. Never mind that, was the third. How to get him out?

"What do you want, Black?" she spat at him.

"Want?" he chuckled. "To talk to you, of course. What else would I want?"

"A shag?" Caitlin suggested pithily.

"You know me far too well," he murmured, squeezing her that bit tighter.

"Fuck you," Caitlin spat, struggling.

"Now, now. Language, Caitlin," Sirius taunted, in that arrogant manner that always made her want to slap him. However, she'd always had the last word before and she wasn't about to change things now. She promptly repeated herself in Welsh.

"That's not what I meant and you know it," Sirius growled, a hint of menace in his voice. "But never mind that. Cait, we need to talk."

"I've got nothing to say to you," Caitlin hissed.

"Fine with me," Sirius shrugged. "I'll do the talking. All you have to do is listen."

Caitlin glanced around the room, desperately trying to think of a way out. The Auror Training Manuals didn't actually have a section on what to do when ambushed in your own home by the man who betrayed your mother and your best friend to their deaths. Think, Caitlin, think! And then two things came to her. One was a piece of Taoist wisdom saying that the best way to conquer was by surrendering. The other was the suggestion she'd just made to him bilingually. That and the fact he'd been celibate for twelve years and more...

Slowly, very slowly, she began to relax her muscles, breathing deeply, allowing herself to go limp against him. Sure enough, his grip on her loosened. Working so far. She started leaning back into him, resting one hand on his thigh in a gesture subtle enough to avoid him seeing through her, yet obvious enough to start suggesting things to him. Now, would Sirius fall for it?

"That's more like it," Sirius breathed. "You know, Cait, you've hardly changed a bit. You don't look a day older."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," Caitlin purred, trying to ignore the feeling of revulsion in her stomach.

"I built my career on it," Sirius murmured, nuzzling her neck. Caitlin forced herself to think of Severus to avoid flinching as he began kissing her, gently nibbling at her skin. It's Severus. Not him. This is Severus doing this to you, this is Severus's lips on you, Sevi's hands on your skin. It worked far better than she'd expected. Sirius was being surprisingly gentle, and he seemed to know what he was doing. A low moan escaped her lips. Sirius heard it and, taking it as a request for more, let his initial inhibitions go.

"God, I've missed you so much," he groaned, his kisses getting more fervent as a decade of repression finally gave way. He lowered his arms, moving his hands to rest on her stomach, freeing up her arms. Caitlin, her desperate fantasising about Severus shattered by the sound of Sirius's voice, felt the revulsion return once more, doubled in strength by the realisation that she'd been enjoying herself, however briefly. Time to end this while her willpower held. Slowly, she crossed her arms in front of her and rested her palms on his chest, just below his shoulders. Sirius Black's Auror training was twelve years out of date, and the DDAE's Unarmed Combat Specialist was in the mood for giving lessons.

Grabbing the front of his robes, Caitlin flipped forward and went into a forward roll. Sirius didn't even have time to swear as he found himself flying head over heels and crashing into the far wall. Caitlin, with far more practice at this sort of thing, was on her feet immediately and had her wand in her hand.

"I built my career on that," Caitlin smirked. Always the last word, as usual. Lifting her wand, she pointed it at him.

"Avada Ke-dammit!" Sirius's reactions evidently weren't as rusty as she'd thought, because he'd taken one look at her, one shocked, betrayed look, picked himself up and raced out of the room before she could finish.

"Get back here!" she snarled, racing after him. Sirius vaulted over the stair rail and was on the ground floor before she'd even crossed the landing. Wasting no more time, she slid down the banister after him.

He'd run into the front room. Gritting her teeth, Caitlin raced in after him. And found herself up against the point of the sword that adorned her mantelpiece. The enchanted one that Disarming Charms didn't work against, and that had been in her family for millennia, been wielded by no less than three mighty kings and had as many different names in its time. The one she thought had been protected by the best security charms she could weave. Evidently not. Sirius must have planned for the possibility of needing a weapon and broken through them while she'd slept, damn him.

"Please put that back," she croaked.

"Make me," Sirius grinned. There was a dangerous look in his eyes, a rather wild and unpredictable one that meant anything could happen. This could be risky. But

probably not as risky as being pinioned and defenceless on her own bed, in grave danger of being betrayed by her own libido.

"Sirius, I mean it, put it back," Caitlin warned him. "It's dangerous in the wrong hands."

"Not until you've heard me out," said Sirius firmly. No hint of sexual attraction about him now. It seemed he too was determined not to let physical desire get the better of him.

"OK, but you might want to put the sword down," Caitlin told him. "It burns the hands of a coward."

Sirius just smirked back at her, transferring the sword to his weaker left hand as he held up his right palm.

"Nothing wrong with it," he grinned.

"I know," Caitlin replied. "I lied about that bit." Without further ado, she spun round and kicked the sword out of his hand, sending it and him flying. "And now," she said, raising her wand, "it's time we called it a night. Adios, Siri." She prepared to cast the Killing Curse again. "Avada Kedavra!"

A lesser wizard would have died in that moment. However, Sirius Black had once been an Auror himself, and some things you never forgot. "Accio sword!" He didn't have a wand but at that distance it didn't matter, and the sword was back in his hands in a second. Holding it up with the flat facing Caitlin, he was just in time to block the spell and divert it out of the open window, where it hit a passing pigeon. He never had liked the birds.

Caitlin mentally swore. Trust Sirius to have grabbed probably the only thing in the room capable of deflecting the Killing Curse. Of course, he was now also armed again, and she didn't think he'd fall for the fictitious magical qualities trick again.

He got to his feet and advanced on her once more. Brandishing her wand like a weapon, she backed away. They began circling each other, two foes evenly matched, both waiting for the other to make the first move.

"Look, Cait, just give in," Sirius gasped. "You can't hurt me while I've got this sword, and I don't want to hurt you. I just want to talk to you."

"You'd have raped me in my own bed given half a chance," Caitlin spat at him. To her surprise, Sirius actually looked hurt at that accusation.

"That's not true," he said, wounded.

For one single moment, Caitlin hesitated. There was something about him that reminded her of how he used to be, in those idyllic far off days when he'd still been an Auror. There was something about him that almost convinced her he actually cared. Until she recalled the all-too-real memory of Lily lying dead in her arms on a Welsh

mountainside, with her newly orphaned son sobbing, and Caitlin's own traumatised daughter sitting mute and uncomprehending. Deanna hadn't spoken or moved of her own volition for another three months, and when she finally did come round, she remembered nothing of her first three years. She might have forgiven Lily's death. She would never forgive what it had done to the children left behind.

"Sirius," she said coldly, "You're a liar. Sabre Lux!" It was a charm of her own invention, inspired by a Muggle science fiction film, of all things. It caused a beam of purple light to appear at the end of her

wand, which could then be wielded as a makeshift sword. It was actually very effective and could slice through virtually anything.

Sirius's face hardened at her words. "So be it," he snarled. "Should have known you'd never listen." He brandished the sword and the fight began in earnest.

As fighters, they proved fairly evenly matched. Sirius was bigger and stronger, but Caitlin was quicker and more agile. Sirius had always been better at handling a sword, but he was out of practice, and facing an opponent with over a decade's worth of martial arts skills to back her fighting up with. Then there was the fact that Sirius didn't seem to want to actually do her any damage. Most of his energy seemed to be going into fending her off. Caitlin wondered at that, but didn't have time to think about it. All she cared about right now was getting him out of her house. Ideally in a DDAE body bag, but she was prepared to be flexible.

The fight went on for some time, just the two of them duelling around the front room, Caitlin attempting to land a blow on him, Sirius successfully escaping harm and less successfully trying to manoeuvre the fight towards the door and freedom. Something had to give, and finally it did. After all, Caitlin was at peak fitness and hadn't been living off the contents of Muggle dustbins for the past month.

Caitlin's light-blade swept towards him. Sirius held the sword up in an attempt to parry it, but whether through weariness or inattention, was holding it blade-first, not flat-first. The two blades met head-on, and, being equal magically, sliced straight through each other.

Caitlin's blade, being composed of light and magic, promptly reattached itself. Sirius wasn't so lucky. The blade of his sword clattered to the ground.

Caitlin cancelled her own spell, staring at the blade. Twenty thousand years old, forged by the Tylwyth Teg of Glynafon, and Sirius bloody Black breaks it within half an hour of laying his hands on it! I will kill him for this. She didn't get the chance. Sirius Black stared at the blade, then at the remains of his sword, then at Caitlin. Their eyes locked. Then Sirius, evidently deciding that discretion was the better part of

valour, threw the sword hilt to the floor and, taking a running leap Caitlin hadn't realised he was still capable of, dived through the window.

"Come back here, you bastard!" Caitlin yelled, racing to the shattered remnants of what had once been her front window. "I haven't finished with you yet!" She aimed a curse at him down the street. It missed as he seemed to shrink, dropping to all fours and leaping around the corner, out of sight. He was gone.

Alone once more, Caitlin sank to her knees, exhausted. The adrenaline rush was subsiding, and as she surveyed what was left of her front room, she realised what had just happened, what could have just happened. As a chill September breeze blew around the room, Caitlin started to cry.

The following morning at Hogwarts dawned just like any other. Half of Gryffindor House were up at the crack of dawn taking bracing cold showers, exercising, meditating, studying or a mixture of all four, whereas the other half hauled themselves out of bed at the very last minute, and barely staggered down to breakfast in time, generally looking like they'd been dragged through a hedge backwards. Most of Ravenclaw were discussing the finer points of Tolstoy or Plato, or trying to puzzle out one of the more obscure branches of Transfiguration. The Hufflepuffs were busy assigning buddies to their vast batch of new first years and generally trying to keep their house in a peaceful and harmonious condition. In Slytherin, the plotting and intrigue had started already. However, there was one small difference this year. This year, it all seemed to be directed at one group in particular, namely the new first years.

At the moment, they all seemed to be assembled in one big group. Separate cliques had yet to really form, which, as Rianne remarked,

was a bit of a shame as no one could play them off against each other yet. Still, there hadn't been any trouble so far.

"Give it time," Luella said, glaring at Rupert Goyle as the massed ranks of Slytherin House made their way to breakfast. "If his middle name's not trouble, I'll be very surprised."

"Actually, it's Ignatius," said a voice from behind them. Draco Malfoy. He too was glaring at the youngest Goyle. "But he is a little bastard." He fell into step in between Luella and Rianne, seemingly oblivious to the looks they were giving him. "So, may I take it you ladies don't like him either?"

"His aura bespeaks untrustworthiness," Rianne replied. "But then, the same could be said for half the house, including you, I might add, so that's not really any help."

Luella was rather less cagey. "Malfoy, he's the only person in this house I dislike more than you."

Draco pouted. "You've hurt my feelings now."

"Hey, so I have," Luella noted. "Watch me not care."

"Ooh, get her," Draco said nonchalantly. "Well, fortunately for you, I'm a magnanimous and forgiving type." He ignored the stunned looks and raised eyebrows on the two girls' faces. "And if you ever need someone to, you know, dish out some extracurricular punishment on your behalf with regards to the Junior Goyle Posse, then just let me know, and I shall make the necessary arrangements." With a nod and a wink, he was off, chatting to Pansy Parkinson, who was already bemoaning her little sister's theft of her best eyeliner.

"Junior Goyle Posse?" Rianne asked, bemused.

"It's a Muggle thing," Luella explained. "But I never thought I'd ever hear Malfoy using the word. And did I really just hear him offering to carry out punishment beatings for us?"

"Don't knock it," Rianne warned her. "We might need him yet."

Up ahead, the threatened trouble was already starting to break out. Rupert Goyle had noticed Deanna and Marlie walking in front of him.

"Hey!" he yelled. "There's the brave and mighty Auror's kid!"

"Oh for god's sake," Deanna muttered. "Here we go."

"Ignore him," Marlie advised. "He might get bored and go away."

"This I doubt," Deanna sighed. She was not wrong.

"Yeah, really brave!" Camilla Crabbe chimed in. "So brave, she fainted as soon as the Dementor walked in!"

Deanna gritted her teeth. "So, Marlie, still think it's wrong to poison first years?"

"We were never as bad as that lot," said Marlie. "Were we?"

The other first years were taking up the refrain. "Woo! Look, Tyler, a Dementor's coming!" Ramon Macnair shouted.

"Sod it," Deanna muttered. "With me, Marls?"

"They say the Patronus Charm involves saying Expecto Patronum and recalling a happy memory," Marlie murmured back.

"Let's do it," Deanna grinned, before spinning round. "Expecto Patronum!" the two of them chanted.

Deanna's charm worked beautifully, a silver falcon leaping from her wand, sending the first years shrieking. Marlie's wand, however, merely spat out a few silver sparks.

"Bugger it," she muttered. "How come you're so good at this sort of thing?"

Deanna didn't hear her. She was facing down the remaining first years, who were now glaring at her with undisguised hostility.

"That's not allowed!" yelled Bethany Abbott. "Magic's not allowed in the corridors - you'll lose your badge for that!"

"I'm sorry," Deanna purred. "I thought I heard someone say a Dementor had got in. Evidently I was mistaken. A point off Slytherin for misleading prefects, Macnair!" she shouted at the retreating first year.

The first years grumbled. However, they kept quiet. A lesson on the wisdom of publicly hassling Deanna Tyler had been learnt. Marlie, however, wasn't quite so unassailable. As Deanna starting moving away, Rupert Goyle turned his attention to Marlie.

"Didn't see your Patronus, half-blood. What's the matter, take after your father?"

"You leave my dad out of this," Marlie snapped.

"Make me, Squib-girl," Rupert taunted. Hissing, Marlie stepped forward, flexing her nails. Raking them down his ugly little face suddenly seemed very appealing.

Deanna noticed that Marlie wasn't with her and turned around to see her friend advancing on a leering Rupert Goyle. Groaning, she walked back towards them.

"Goyle 2, stop hassling your elders," she snapped. "Marls, leave him, he's not worth it." She reached out and took Marlie by the elbow, attempting to lead her away.

"Leave him, he's not worth it!" Daisy Parkinson mimicked in a high-pitched, Essex-accented whine totally unlike Deanna's Surrey with a bare hint of Welsh voice. Marlie made to go for her, wand at the ready. Deanna stopped her, an arm around her waist.

"That's another five points off for mocking a prefect," said Deanna. "Come on, Marls, let's go." She dragged Marlie off before anything else happened.

As soon as they'd reached the Entrance Hall, Marlie shook Deanna off.

"I could have handled that myself, you know!" she snapped.

"Don't be silly, you'd have got in a fight," said Deanna. "And probably ended up in detention for picking on innocent first years."

Marlie glared at Deanna. "Look at you," she said sharply. "The badge is getting to you already. This time last year, you'd have pitched in with me! Now you're defusing things and acting all even-handed? Since when, Tyler?"

Deanna rolled her eyes. She'd had quite enough already this morning what with sorting Little Goyle out.

"It's called growing up, Marlie," she sighed. "You might want to give it a go some time."

"Fine," Marlie snapped back. "You go, 'grow up'. Turn into a proper little prefect, why don't you? Just don't expect me to be there when you realise you haven't had any fun in three years!" With that, she turned and flounced off, heading for the main entrance.

"Great," sighed Deanna. "Just great." She turned away and noticed Professor Snape emerging from the Slytherin Corridor. He seemed to be in a hurry. As soon as he saw her, he rushed over.

"Deanna," he gasped, unusually not bothering with the public formality. "There you are. Listen, I need to talk to you. Something... something's happened."

Deanna looked around. All seemed normal enough. Sure, it was crowded and noisy, and Slytherin were in the minuses already, but what else was new?

"What's up?" she asked, concerned.

Snape hesitated. "It's about your mother. Listen, can we go to my office? This is best dealt with privately."

Deanna's expression hadn't changed much on the outside, but anyone who knew her well would have noticed an almost imperceptible widening of her eyes and a raising of both eyebrows that were the only giveaways of what she was really feeling.

"Is she OK?" Deanna whispered. Snape didn't answer her.

"Let's go," was all he said. "I'll tell you all about it when we get there."

For the second time in twenty four hours, Deanna followed Snape to his office. Not a word was said. Deanna couldn't think coherently enough to say anything. She could already feel the tears prickling behind her eyes. She'd always known that being an Auror was dangerous, probably the most dangerous work there was. She'd always known that there was a risk that her mother could be badly hurt or even killed. And yet she'd never really believed it would ever happen. Not her mum. Not the most powerful, bravest, smartest, most cunning Dark Arts fighter the Ministry had. It wasn't possible, was it? Yet Sirius Black was on the loose, and he'd had her mother more frightened than she'd ever seen her. Deanna felt numb inside. This is it, she thought. He's going to get me inside that office, and tell me my mum's been killed. She wondered why she didn't feel worse than she did. Maybe it was because it hadn't sunk in yet.

He opened the office door and motioned for her to go in. A cloaked figure was sitting by the fire, hunched up with its back towards her. It gasped and turned around as they came in, before sighing, relieved.

But not nearly as relieved as Deanna.

"Mum!" she cried.

Caitlin smiled weakly. "Hello, love," she said. Deanna raced over, flung herself at her mother's feet and hugged her.

"You're alive!" she whispered. Caitlin pulled her daughter close, kissing her on the cheek.

"Yes, I'm alive, precious one," Caitlin said, tears in her own eyes. "I'm alive yet."

Deanna buried her face in her mother's cloak, a gorgeous soft blue one that Deanna had always like the feel of. She was crying freely now, knowing deep in her bones that it almost hadn't been so, that it could easily have been Melissa Lovegood waiting for her here with the dreaded news.

"I love you," she sobbed.

"I love you too," she heard Caitlin say tenderly. Then in a slightly sharper tone, presumably addressed to Snape, "What's she been told?"

"By me, only that I needed to talk to her about you. I gave no details about last night's incident," he replied. "I don't know what she's heard elsewhere, but she didn't look unduly distressed or alarmed when I found her."

"And wouldn't now if you'd either told her the full story immediately or nothing at all!" Caitlin snapped peevishly. "Honestly, Severus, the poor child must have thought I'd died!" Deanna nodded assent from deep within the folds of Caitlin's cloak. Caitlin tutted with annoyance. "Men, they're all the same," Caitlin muttered tersely. "They always have to dramatise everything." She took Deanna by the shoulders, lifting her up so as to make eye contact. "Listen, love, I don't want you to worry or anything, or be frightened. I'm a tough old girl, me, and it takes more than a little skirmish to bring me down. I intend to be up and fighting for a long time to come, don't you worry."

Deanna nodded, but she wasn't reassured. Something had happened, and it was clearly more than just a little skirmish.

"What happened, Mum?" she asked. "You didn't come all this way for nothing. Are you alright?"

Caitlin nodded. "Nothing wrong with me but a few cuts and bruises. I'm going to be fine, love. But something did happen last night. Nothing too bad, cariad, I've been in situations a lot more dangerous than that one.

It's just most of them I never tell you about. This one though is going to be all over the front page of the Daily Prophet, and I don't want you reading about it there and panicking. Get me?" Deanna nodded. "Good," Caitlin continued. "Anyway, here's what happened. Deanna, it was Sirius Black. He was at the house last night."

"What?" Deanna gasped, horrified. "Oh my god, Mum, are you alright?" She immediately held on to her mother for all she was worth.

"I told you, yes I'm fine," Caitlin soothed her. "Don't you worry about me, I've faced far worse than him before now. He was on his own, and out of practice. Don't you worry, I saw him off soon enough. My only regret is that he got away."

"He's still out there then," Deanna said, trying to keep her fear hidden. She knew her mother far too well to be put off by her glib assertions of easily driving him off after a brief and overwhelmingly one-sided tussle.

"For now," said Caitlin. "We'll find him though, don't you worry."

Deanna wasn't convinced. "What about you?" she demanded. "Suppose he comes back?"

Caitlin shook her head. "He won't," she said confidently. "Not at the moment anyway. I don't he actually wanted to hurt me, I think he just wanted to frighten me. He may have wanted information too - he kept saying he had to talk to me. Anyway, he won't be going near the house for a while. Forensics are all over it at the moment, he'd be mad to go anywhere near it. Also, I'm at Melissa's at the moment. Security precautions. I did tell Melissa I'd be alright at home, but she was having none of it. Said I'd be in Carmela's way, and besides, it's best if I'm elsewhere for now. So, that's where I'll be if you need me."

Deanna digested this in silence, until something else occurred to her.

"The house, Mum!" she cried. "What happened to the house? Is it alright? It is still standing, isn't it? What about my stuff, was any of that damaged? He didn't go in my room, did he?" Deanna looked outraged at the thought of Sirius Black going through her belongings.

"No, don't worry," Caitlin reassured her with a smile. Normal teenage behaviour was reasserting itself. That was a good sign. "The living room's wrecked, but the rest of the house seems OK. Carmela said to tell you that your room appears undisturbed."

"That's alright then," sighed Deanna. "Going to cost you much to fix?"

"Not really. A few Reparo charms will sort most of it, and Forensics'll take all the debris away. I do have some bad news though," Caitlin sighed. "One of the heirlooms got broken."

"No!" Deanna cried. "Which one?"

"Excalibur."

"Argh!" Deanna grabbed her hair in anguish. "You can get it fixed, can't you?" she asked hopefully.

"Mel's looking up a skilled swordsmith for me as we speak," said Caitlin. "It's going to cost a bit, but yes, don't worry, your inheritance is safe."

Deanna breathed sigh of relief. "Thanks Mars for that." She looked at her mother tenderly. "You are going to be alright, aren't you?"

"I'll be fine," Caitlin reassured her, smiling at her daughter as she traced a finger down the girl's face. Her eyes swept idly over her daughter's uniform. Until, that is, they alighted on Deanna's prefect badge.

"What's this?" Caitlin exclaimed. "You didn't have that when I saw you off!"

"It's a prefect badge," Deanna admitted, blushing. "They made me a prefect, Mum!"

"Please excuse your mother's blonder than usual attitude, Deanna," Severus put in. He'd been watching proceedings from the other side of his desk. "She's not overly familiar with the design of the Slytherin Prefect Badge, never having had one herself."

"Severus, be quiet!" Caitlin shot at him, not as fiercely as she'd have liked. "Deanna, that's wonderful, well done! I am so proud of you! You're the first person in our family to get one since my gran Carrie! Oh, well done, love!" Tears in her eyes, Caitlin gave her embarrassed daughter a congratulatory hug.

"I had one when I was at school," Severus volunteered with a grin.

"That's because you're a sycophant," Caitlin replied. "And you! You never told me you'd put her up for a badge!"

"Because you're notoriously indiscreet and would have ruined the surprise," Severus responded tartly. His expression softened. "Surprise, Caitlin. Your daughter's a prefect."

Caitlin gave Deanna another hug, kissing her on the forehead. Deanna squirmed.

"Mum!" she whined, in the universal wail of embarrassed teenagers everywhere. "Stop it, you're embarrassing me!"

Caitlin let her go, still smiling. "Oh, you. There's no one else here except Professor Snape."

"Exactly," said Deanna. "I've got spend three hours a week in a classroom with him! You've ruined Potions for me, I hope you realise that."

"Stop exaggerating," Caitlin told her, grinning.

"Deanna, if it's any consolation to you, I will drink a mild Forgetfulness Potion as soon as you've both gone, erasing my memory of this whole encounter," Severus said casually. "Does that make you feel better?"

"It'll do," said Deanna, sniffing.

"Excellent." Severus got to his feet. "In that case, seeing as you both appear to have cheered up considerably, I think it's time Deanna rejoined the rest of the school. Deanna, are you feeling better?"

Deanna nodded. "Yeah, I'll be fine."

"Good," Severus nodded as both Caitlin and Deanna got up to leave. "In that case, I shall see you this afternoon, Deanna. Good day."

"See you later, sir!" Deanna fingered her badge. "Oh and, sir."

"What?"

Deanna smiled at him. "Thanks." Waving one last goodbye to her mother, she was gone.

Caitlin sagged with relief as her daughter left. "Thank god that's over with," she sighed.

Severus went straight over to her, taking her in his arms. "Caitlin, it's alright," he soothed her. "You don't have to pretend anymore, I'm here. I'm here, Cait." He drew his own cloak around her in a protective gesture as she nestled against him. She was trembling as she leant against him, but as he held her, stroking her hair, she seemed to relax. She sighed a little, and Severus could have sworn she was smiling. Not in any calculating or designed way, just the contented smile of a woman at peace. Severus decided there and then that he'd not seen her look more beautiful, and never so innocent. He realised that he'd never really known what it was like simply holding a woman in his arms like this, without any accompanying passions, be they rage, agony or lust. With Lily, they'd always spent too much time arguing and making up; holding her, he'd always been too afraid it wouldn't last to really relax. Invariably, it hadn't. As for his past with Caitlin, well. It was probably best not dwelled on. However, he could categorically state that this was the closest he'd ever felt to her. It was quite strange. He'd

stopped hating her a while ago, he knew that. But he hadn't realised he'd stopped fearing her until Melissa had called him at six o'clock that morning and told him Sirius Black had attacked Caitlin, and his first thought had been to run to her and hold her.

Impulsively, he planted a kiss on top of her head. Sighing, Caitlin snuggled in closer, turning slightly to one side as she slid her own arms around him. Smoothing her hair down, gently lifting it off her shoulder, Severus decided that life just didn't get better than this.

Until he glanced at her newly exposed neck and saw some lurid purple bruises that could only be lovebites.

All affection died in that instant as Severus pushed her roughly away, seething. She has some other man in her bed, and she DARES to come to me for comfort?! "Severus, what are you doing?" Caitlin asked, startled by his abrupt change in behaviour, and not at all sure she liked the rage in his eyes.

"Who is he??" Severus snarled at her. "Tell me! Who... is... he??" He shook her, enraged at her duplicity.

"Severus, stop it, you're hurting me!" Caitlin cried, confused and secretly rather afraid. "Who's who?"

"Those bruises on your neck!" Severus raged. "They didn't get there by themselves, did they? Did they!"

Caitlin flinched away from him, struggling to get out of his grip. "Let go of me!" she yelled at him.

"Tell me who it was, Caitlin!" Severus roared, livid. "Tell me!"

Caitlin's indignation finally got the better of her fear as she screamed out the name of the one who'd marked her.

"It was Sirius Black!" she snarled in turn. Severus let her go at once, stunned. Of all the names she could have given, he'd not expected that one.

"Black?" he whispered, unable to believe it. She wouldn't have willingly let him touch her that way, would she? The thought of that monster with his greedy paws all over his Caitlin was bad enough in itself, but the thought of her enjoying it was much, much worse. "Please, no," he whispered. "Please, Caitlin, please tell me it isn't true."

Caitlin was glaring back at him, gasping for breath. He could see tears in her eyes, and her face was a mix of rage and pain.

"Want to know how it happened, do you? Do you?" she demanded. "Think I wanted him feeling me up, do you?"

"Ye- no, no, of course not!" Severus stammered, trying to calm her down. Just because he didn't fear her in the same way he'd once done didn't mean she wasn't dangerous when angry.

"Would it make you feel better if I told you I came on to him?" Caitlin snarled. "Would it? Would it give you the satisfaction?"

"No!" Severus spat. He regained control of himself with an effort. "You didn't. Did you?" Please say no. For the love of God, please. I'd rather he raped you than know you gave yourself to him willingly.

Caitlin didn't answer. She just stared back at him coldly.

"Caitlin," he stared at her, feeling his heart sink. "Cait, please. Oh gods." He stepped back, a wave of revulsion threatening to overcome him. "Caitlin, he betrayed Lily and your mother to their deaths, he killed thirteen innocents himself, how could you?"

Caitlin was standing against his desk, holding on to it for support. She looked like she was about to faint. She'd been staring at the floor as he'd spoken, seemingly unable to bear the disgust in his eyes. When she did finally look at him, there were tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Because it was the only way," she choked. "It was the only way to get him to let me go. I didn't have my arms free, I couldn't kick him, he had my wand and I couldn't make eye contact for Glamoury. I couldn't think of anything else to do." She looked

away again with a sob. "I'm sorry, Severus," she whispered. "I'm sorry." She turned away from him, looking to walk away. However, the stresses of the last twelve hours and the total lack of sleep that night had taken their toll. Her knees gave way, and she clutched at the desk to stop herself falling.

Severus was by her side in a second. "Cait, don't move. Sit down, you need to rest." He helped her sit down, putting an arm round her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, staring at thin air.

"Don't be," Severus murmured, holding her. "You did what you had to." He lowered his eyes, jealousy having given way to a deep-seated feeling of shame for having doubted her, coupled with a new respect for her. Pretending to desire someone who revolted her... He knew he'd never have been able to do that. "I'm the one who should be saying sorry," he said, genuinely remorseful.

"He made my skin crawl," Caitlin whispered.

"Caitlin..." She seemed not to hear him.

"The only way I was able to fake my way through it was to imagine it was you." Severus's ears pricked up at this. A warm feeling began to spread through him, followed by speculative fantasies centreing on how she'd react if he started kissing her neck and running his hands over her. Stop it at once, he told himself, the poor woman's been through quite enough.

"And if he hadn't spoken, if his voice hadn't reminded me it wasn't you..." Caitlin buried her head in her hands. "I feel like a whore!" she said savagely.

"You're not!" said Severus, unwilling to hear any more of this. "Caitlin, listen, it wasn't your fault, you just did what you had to. Don't blame

yourself, don't think about what might have been. You're alive and unharmed, and safe. That's all that matters."

Caitlin nodded mutely, reaching out for him again. Severus lost no time taking her in his arms. Resting her head on his shoulder, she wept softly. Severus shivered as her hair fell back, exposing the ugly, purple bruising marring her skin. He felt for his wand and touched the tip against her. He felt her freeze, flinching a little as the wand brushed against her. Anger flared in him once more at the thought of Sirius causing pain, however minor, to her. He forced himself to remain calm. Getting angry at him wouldn't help Caitlin now. Whispering some healing charms, he watched in satisfaction as the bruises disappeared before his very eyes. Noting the presence of more bruises on her arms, he healed them too. In seconds, Caitlin's skin was as unmarked and beautiful as it had ever been. She seemed to realise what he'd done, as she burrowed into his robes, clutching him that bit tighter, and coincidentally exposing more of her neck.

It was too much temptation. Unable to resist, Severus lowered his mouth and kissed her neck. He smiled as he heard her gasp and felt her jump in his arms. Sitting upright once more, he couldn't help but grin triumphantly as she sat up, shocked.

"Severus!" she squeaked.

"What, didn't you like it?" he purred. "I thought you'd been fantasising about it."

"Well yes, but-" The rest of the sentence was abruptly cut off by Severus planting his lips on hers. She really was quite adorable when she was shocked. He drew back a little and paused, barely an inch away from her.

"Let's say you have," he murmured, "and proceed on that basis, shall we? After all, I'm not pinning your arms and legs down. If you don't want me, fight me." He kissed her again, this time rather less gently. She froze for the briefest of moments, before starting to kiss him back, tentatively at first, then with increasing enthusiasm. Soon, they were entwined in an embrace, arms around each other, fingers in each other's hair, all thoughts of proceeding carefully with a delicate regard for the other's feelings forgotten. Severus began tearing at the fastenings of Caitlin's cloak, sliding it off her shoulders and throwing it to the floor behind her.

"Considerate of you," Caitlin murmured in between kisses. "These dungeon floors can be cold after all." She was still wearing her white vest and jeans from the night before, and her shoulders were bare. With one fluid move, she rolled back on to her cloak, pulling Severus down on top of her and pinning him in place with her legs, wrapped around his waist in a pincer hold. "Then again, maybe that won't be a problem." She claimed his mouth again.

So much for fighting me off, Severus smiled to himself. Breaking away with an effort, he began removing his cloak and outer robes, watched by a now utterly beguiling Caitlin. He could resist no longer, not that he really wanted to. "Caitlin Tyler, I am going to have you right here on this dungeon floor, and there's not a single damn thing you can do about it," he hissed savagely, before kissing her again, sliding her vest and bra straps down her arms.

Caitlin arched her back, wriggling out of her vest with his help. "I was so hoping you'd say that," she whispered, eyes glowing with delight.

"You're mine, Caitlin," Severus growled, attacking her neck and shoulder with a ferocity that would leave its own marks later on. Somehow, he had a feeling she wouldn't mind that anything like as much. Besides, if Sirius Black did return for a rematch with her, it gave him great pleasure to think about the look on the lying, murderous scumbag's face when he realised that someone else had established a prior claim to Caitlin's favours.

"I'll tolerate a lot from you, Caitlin," Severus said, passion and a jealousy that hadn't died yet adding a harsh undertone to his voice. "I'll take abuse, pain, humiliation, and suffer it gladly for your sake. But

what I will not tolerate under any circumstances, the one thing I will not abide, is sharing you. You're mine, you belong to me, and if any other man so much as lays a finger on you, I will kill him myself. Understand?"

"Perfectly," Caitlin purred, grabbing him by his waistcoat and pulling him towards her. "That's if he's still alive after I'm done with him." She promptly grabbed him by the back of his head and pulled him into a kiss that was as vicious as any he'd given

her. A small anxious voice at the back of his mind wondered if he was included in that long list of men who'd die horribly for the privilege of having desired her. It was swiftly overridden, however, by the rather less worried voice at the front of his mind reminding him that there were far worse ways to die and he had to go some time. Returning the kiss, he slid his hands down her sides, caressing her curves before reaching for the fastenings on her jeans. He'd give the Muggles their due, zip fastenings made things a lot easier in the heat of passion.

"Ares, Caitlin, I need you," Severus moaned softly.

"Give it to me," he heard her hissing, writhing beneath him. "It's been so long."

Severus began wrestling with his own clothing, determined to let nothing stand in his way now. More than a few demons needed exorcising. One way or another, it was time he dealt with this obsession once and for all.

Until they were rudely interrupted by the sound of the nine o'clock bell indicating the start of lessons. Out in the corridor, the sound of doors opening and the voices of students shouting and laughing as they made their way to their classes shattered any erotic thoughts the two of them might have entertained.

Severus swore fluently and creatively using words Caitlin hadn't even realised he knew.

"That about sums it up," she remarked when he'd finished. She began rearranging her top, rolling out from under him. He let her go, albeit reluctantly. He'd been reduced to monosyllabic glaring, and Caitlin pitied his first class of the day.

He retrieved his own outer garments and began rearranging them. Once presentable again, he reached out and helped her to her feet.

"I really hate my job sometimes," he growled. He looked her over. "Caitlin, are those clothes the ones you were wearing for work yesterday?"

"Er... they might be," Caitlin admitted.

"You slept in them didn't you."

"I didn't exactly sleep in them," said Caitlin evasively.

"But you have been wearing them non-stop since you started work yesterday, which was when?"

"Before that," Caitlin admitted. "I was up at eight getting the kids ready for school, then after seeing them off, I started work at noon. I was on the early evening shift."

Severus grimaced. "You've not had a shower in all that time either, have you?"

"Um...

no?"

Severus shook his head, appalled. "Dear gods, Caitlin, you disgust me sometimes. Here, use mine. My living quarters are through there. And when you're done with the shower, leave your clothes out for the house elves, borrow my nightshirt and get some sleep. You look like you could do with it."

Caitlin was about to deny any such thing, but found herself yawning. "Not tired," she muttered.

"How silly of me to think so, you seem so energetic," Severus remarked. "Go on, get yourself in there, have the wash and sleep you so badly need. Don't worry about work, Melissa specifically told me that you're not expected back for the next three days at least."

"Nice," Caitlin murmured, realising that she was absolutely spent. Shagged out, as Sirius Black used to refer to it, although unfortunately not literally.

"Too nice," Severus murmured. "Go on, go. There's a bell-rope by the head of the bed - if you get hungry, give it a pull and a house elf will bring you something."

Caitlin nodded. "OK," she said as she dragged herself off towards the door that led to his private quarters. She turned as she reached it, smiling back at him. "Don't be too hard on those poor kids, you hear? It's not their fault, after all."

Severus muttered a few choice words about what he thought about the little brats, none fortunately loud enough for Caitlin to hear. She got the general idea though.

"Never mind, sweetheart," she pouted. "Just think of me waiting for you. That'll get you through it." Winking, she disappeared into his private quarters, the door closing behind her.

"I will, though," he sighed ruefully, quite unable to think how he was going to concentrate knowing that Caitlin was mere yards away, curled up in his bed, wearing his nightclothes, and nothing else. "That's the problem!"

Chapter Eight Beware of Magical Creatures

Marlie, after storming away from Deanna in a huff, had abandoned all thoughts of breakfast. She wasn't especially hungry anyway, not after the feast the night before, and right now, she needed to be alone. The thought of sitting down to eat with Deanna either glaring, or worse, giving her despairing, sanctimonious looks all through breakfast, really did not appeal. At the back of her mind, a little voice was telling her that perhaps she'd been a little out of order back then, and maybe she should go and apologise, and that Deanna might actually be right, and maybe she was acting like a spoilt child, and perhaps it was time she grew up.

It was only a little voice though. Pushing her way through the crowds, the dominant impulse to storm off and sulk took over, and she found herself walking through the main doors and out into the sunshine.

It was going to be another gorgeous September day, Marlie could tell. No clouds anywhere, the sun was shining, and yet the early morning dew and mists hadn't cleared yet. There was a chill in the air, but Marlie's school robes had been painstakingly enchanted to keep the wearer at an ideal temperature whatever it was like outside. Of course, it only worked within a range of 10 to 25 degrees centigrade, but that covered most eventualities outside the worst of the winter months. All in all, it was a beautiful day.

Marlie stood on the steps, eyes closed, soaking in the late summer sunshine. Far too nice a day to be stuck inside studying. She wished bunking off lessons was an option, but unfortunately that wasn't anything like as easy to get away with at boarding school as it would have been at a Muggle high school. Still, it was only just past eight o'clock. Plenty of time yet. Sitting down on the steps, she lay back and basked in the sunlight, oblivious to everything around her, not even noticing as a solitary figure approached, moving silently on the grass.

It hadn't been an easy night for him. Wolfsbane, to work best, needed to be taken well in advance of the three day danger zone. Severus, after having seen to Caitlin Tyler's daughter, had proceeded to throw a vial of the stuff at him before conducting him wordlessly to a dungeon and locking him in for the night, taking care to soundproof it. Evidently it was near enough to the Slytherin quarters for Severus to not want him disturbing either his sleep or that of his charges. Lupin shook his

head, still not quite able to get his head around the thought of Severus Snape dealing with children at all, let alone having pastoral responsibilities towards them. And yet, Albus Dumbledore had assured him that Snape was a more than capable Head of House, and the Slytherins adored him. He still would never have believed it had he not seen Severus and Deanna emerging from the dungeons talking animatedly, both seemingly in a good mood. Of course, that good mood had evaporated as soon as the fifth year had gone into the Hall, and Severus had turned to see him and Albus waiting for him. His former friend's characteristic snarl had soon reasserted itself, and it had still been present that morning when he'd opened the dungeon up at some ungodly hour, telling Lupin to get to his quarters, he had more important things to deal with than seeing to a werewolf. He'd then departed, before Lupin could tell him that he didn't actually know where his quarters were yet. However, he'd always been a keen judge of human nature - the Beast had gifted him with that at least - and he knew Severus of old. Severus

wouldn't have been out of bed that early in the morning unless he had to be, and underneath the sneer and the irritation, Lupin had sensed fear, verging on panic, not to mention a smouldering rage just waiting to erupt. Oddly, Lupin had also sensed that it wasn't directed at him. Towards him, Severus seemed to be feeling precisely what he'd said he was feeling - that Lupin was getting in the way and keeping him from being somewhere far more important. Very strange. Still, Severus had been gone before he could say anything, trademark black robes sweeping behind him as he stalked away in a manner that clearly said

he had no time for anyone else or their petty concerns. Maybe some sort of emergency had come up with one of the Slytherins. That would explain a lot.

However, it had meant that he'd been left alone, tired, still in the clothes he'd been wearing, his every muscle aching, his very bones crying out in the aftermath of the change. The Wolfsbane had done more harm than good in retrospect - it had enabled his human side to remain aware of what was going on, but it hadn't subdued the Beast in the slightest. He'd ended up having to fight it all night, scratching at the door, howling his fury and pain out, tormented by the scent of humans and visions of cold, icy-featured blonde witches heartlessly turning their backs on him. Not all of them had short hair and glasses either. He was just thankful it was all over for another month. Madam Pomfrey had treated his cuts and scratches, and what remained of his fingernails, before directing him to his room and sending the house elves to run him a bath and make him breakfast. That, and a walk in the grounds, had repaired the worst of the damage, but the mental wounds would take a lot longer to heal. Next time, he vowed, he'd be on the Wolfsbane as soon as the moon went Gibbous.

He was approaching the school when he saw her. She was lying resplendent on the steps, basking in the radiance of the sun's rays and her own beauty, a mane of brilliant platinum hair cascading to her waist. Lupin quickened his pace, the Beast stirring within him, still powerful enough to voice an opinion if not powerful enough to enforce it.

As he got closer, he felt the monster within fade as he saw that, far from being one of the frozen goddesses of his lunar frenzies, it was one of the students, wearing the standard black robes with the green and silver of Slytherin emblazoned on the front. Not just any student though. He remembered her from the train the day before - how could he forget? Melissa Lovegood's teenage daughter, so like her mother in looks, and so utterly unlike her in personality. He stopped a few feet away from her, so he could look at her properly. She was lying back against the steps, arms spread out, soaking up the sunlight. Her eyes were closed, but Lupin had the feeling she wasn't sleeping. The Beast began to stir again, urging him on to overpower her, revenge himself on her for walking away all those years ago. With an effort, he forced it

back. The moon is waning, and with it your power. And this is not Melissa, but her innocent daughter. Reluctantly, the Beast subsided. Feeling on safer ground, Lupin approached warily.

His feet crunched on the gravel path. Marlie's eyes flickered open, and she sat up, immediately on the alert. She saw who it was and froze.

If she had no idea how she'd appeared to him, then Lupin certainly couldn't have known how he appeared to Marlie in that moment. He didn't know that he had the sun

behind him, and its rays gave him the illusion of a halo. It also had the effect of highlighting the golden streaks in his hair, and bringing out the amber eyes that could fascinate the unwary. They certainly fascinated Marlie. She couldn't help but stare at him, entranced by the predatory way he was moving towards her, the blue robes encasing a slender yet lithe physique, his almost feminine face, and dominating it all, the eyes.

He came to within three feet of her and halted. He seemed to be saying something, but Marlie couldn't hear it. All she was aware of were the amber eyes, calling to her, daring her to approach, to surrender everything she had.

Take me. Not knowing what she was doing, she got to her feet and approached him. She walked right up to him, close enough to touch, and looked up, staring straight into his eyes. He was saying something else to her now, she wasn't sure what. The message coming from his mouth wasn't important anyway. Words could lie, humans could lie.

The Beast never lied. She could hear it calling to her, snarling in her ears, telling her to give in and give up.

"Marlene?" He repeated her name, growing increasingly concerned about her. She didn't seem to be hearing a word he said. He'd greeted her by name as she'd opened her eyes, but she'd just continued to stare at him. He'd asked her if she was alright, and her only response had been to get up and start walking towards him, her eyes vacant, and her walk reminding him of one of those taunting blonde visions of the previous night. She didn't stop until she was right up against him. He didn't like this situation at all. He just hoped she didn't try and touch him. He wasn't sure what would happen if she did.

Touch me, she heard it commanding her. Touch me, feel me, offer yourself up to me. "Yes, I'm yours," she whispered softly, so softly he had trouble hearing her. However, he couldn't ignore her hand reaching up to touch his cheek. Horrified, he snatched her wrist and thrust her away from him. Gasping, she staggered back, raising a hand to steady herself. As she did so, her wrist brushed against that little golden Snitch necklace she was wearing.

The change in her was immediate. She gasped, blinked, shook herself, and began looking about her, clearly wondering what had just happened. Lupin breathed a sigh of relief, and took care to avoid looking directly into her eyes. Damn the Beast.

"Professor Lupin?" she asked, rubbing her eyes. "What just happened?" One minute, she'd been basking in the sunlight, then she'd looked up and next thing she knew she was standing right next to Professor Lupin with a sore wrist. She looked at him suspiciously. "How'd I get here?" she demanded.

"You walked over here," said Lupin gently. "You don't remember?"

Marlie shook her head, fingering her necklace. Tish, tell me what really happened. A decidedly filthy laugh emanated from the necklace, before a vision of what had actually transpired ran through her mind. Oh god. He must think I'm insane.

"Oh! Er, yes, yes of course I remember." She laughed uneasily and slapped the side of her head in an admission of stupidity. "Don't mind me, I'm having a blonde day. So, er, Professor, how are you this morning?"

"Not bad," he smiled, already feeling better. "Tired. I had a bit of a rough night. Didn't get much sleep."

"Oh, you poor thing," said Marlie. She was one of those people with the gift of sleeping anywhere, any time, in virtually any conditions, practically at will. She couldn't imagine not sleeping all night. "Have you had a word with Professor Snape? He does great Sleeping Potions."

A strange grimace crossed Lupin's features at the mention of Professor Snape's name. "He was a little busy when I last saw him," he said. "I think there may have been some emergency with one of your housemates - any idea who it was?"

Marlie shook her head. "No idea. I know he had to speak to Deanna about what happened on the train, but apart from that, nothing as far as I know. Why?"

"No reason, I was just curious," Lupin replied with a lightness he did not feel. "So, Marlene, if you don't mind me asking, why are you out here? Don't you want any breakfast?"

"Not hungry," said Marlie. "It looked nice out here so I thought I'd sit outside for a bit, get a bit of peace and quiet. It's really peaceful out here this early, isn't it sir?" She smiled at him in a way that rarely failed to win men over, especially older men with paternal instincts going to waste.

It worked on Lupin. He found himself smiling in return. He liked her already, and never mind the Beast's urges. She seemed to be a

charming companion, sweet-natured, pretty, innocent, entertaining. He was looking forward to seeing more of her. However, the Beast was stirring, and for once it was actually being useful. Not all was well with the youngster, he could tell. There was some unhappiness about her, something bothering her. Couldn't have that, could he now?

"Yes it is peaceful," he said casually. "Especially when one is troubled and in need of solace." He gazed at her, dropping the casual air. "Is something troubling you, Marlene? It's just that you seem to be the sociable type."

Marlie looked away. Damn it. He'd seen straight through her. Her first instinct was to cover like mad, keep smiling, and deny everything. It was what she'd normally have done. However, there was something about Lupin, something warm, gentle and strangely comforting, that made her feel safe around him. Something that made her want to open herself up to him. In more ways than one, Morticia purred lasciviously at the back of her mind. Swiftly repressing **that** line of thinking, Marlie sighed and decided to come clean.

"It's my dorm mates," she admitted. "I've managed to annoy them already. Well, one of them, but she's the one out of the three I didn't want to annoy."

Lupin nodded sagely. He'd guessed it was something of the sort. He indicated for her to sit down next to him on the steps, which she did.

"Want to talk about it?" he asked with a smile. No doubt about it, there was something in his manner that just had the effect of relaxing her

totally. No longer caring what he thought of her, she launched into a tirade about how everyone in her dorm but her had got a prefect badge, how the three of them had decided that this year was going to be a quiet one where they all behaved and stayed out of trouble. How one of them in particular, Deanna Tyler, her closest friend and former scam partner, had decided to take her unexpected responsibilities seriously. How Marlie was now going to have to wind up certain, er, 'ventures' they'd been involved in, resulting in a loss of cash, prestige and interesting things in her life. How it had now been over a year since they'd kicked her off the Quidditch first team and she was no nearer to getting her place back. How she, the Slytherin Sex Kitten, had been pipped at the post in the Loss of Virginity Stakes by her not particularly glamorous and to be honest, rather nerdy roommate. And finally, how just minutes ago, she'd had a public demonstration of Deanna's new commitment to her role, and a lecture from someone eight months her junior on maturity and growing up.

Lupin said nothing as she ranted on. He listened attentively, making sympathetic noises when required, raising an eyebrow from time to time although, to give him credit, never appearing shocked. Finally, the narrative came to an end.

"And that's it," she finished. "My Sucky Life, in one gripping instalment, subtitled Marlie Lovegood, Saddest Dweeb in Slytherin."

"Dweeb?" Lupin asked. Most of the teenspeak had been easy enough to guess, but that was a new one on him.

"Muggle thing," Marlie explained with a grin. "Refers to a really dull individual with no life. Professor Snape, for example."

Lupin bit back a burst of laughter. Severus always had been something of an obsessive. However, it didn't do to let students know that he shared some of their opinions, especially regarding fellow staff members.

"Now, now, Marlene," he said. "I'm sure Professor Snape's personal life is no one's business but his own."

Marlie looked at him disparagingly. "What personal life?" she demanded. "He lives on campus and appears to have no outside

interests other than Potions, counselling Slytherins and taking points off Gryffindor just because he can."

"Oh, I'm sure he has one really," Lupin countered. "I expect he just prefers to keep it hidden from you lot. But never mind about Professor Snape. Let's get back to you and your litany of woes. As far as I can tell, you're feeling left out because your dorm mates are moving on in all sorts of ways and you're not. Is that pretty much it?"

Marlie nodded. "Yeah," she whispered. "It's like, the four of us have been mates, really good mates, ever since we started Hogwarts. I mean, I don't know what you've

heard about the four of us, but we have been through a lot, and I do mean a lot. We've been through life and death situations together. We've had Sleeping Death poisoning, a Basilisk attack, and that was just me! The others have had wrongful expulsions, going undercover and becoming the most loathed member of the house to get wrongdoers kicked out, getting hit by the Killing Curse and surviving, exorcising cursed diaries, finding out that one of their parents was really a Death Eater on not one but two occasions, having to help a teacher cover up a case of domestic violence, entering somebody else's head to help heal them and nearly dying as a result, and those are just the biggies. Sir, we weren't just friends, we were a hell of a lot closer than that, although not in any kind of girl-on-girl lesbian kind of way, because that'd just be, like, ew."

Lupin had to smile at that. Teenagers, they were all the same. Forming eternal, death-defying, soulmate-level friendships then hastily denying

the very depths of those bonds in case anyone thought they were gay. He remembered his own male friendships. They'd been exactly the same, although he'd always been far less hung up on what other people might think than certain other individuals had been.

"I know what you mean, don't worry," he smiled. "You four were closer than close, sworn allies forever, you and them against the world. Is that right?"

Marlie nodded. "Yeah," she whispered. "Yeah, that's exactly right."

"But now you're not," said Lupin thoughtfully.

"No," Marlie lowered her eyes, lip trembling. "I mean, don't get me wrong, I still love them all to bits, although again I stress the purely platonic, totally non-sexual, in no way lesbian or homoerotic, just friends vibe going on here."

"That's pretty much a given," Lupin assured her. "You were saying?"

"Well, like I said, all through Hogwarts, we've been all that. We spend all our free time together, we study together, we hang out together, we're round each other's houses and on holiday together, and when we need each other, we're there, you know? Especially last year - from Halloween onwards, the whole school was terrified of getting Petrified or worse, and we were right in the thick of things. Big adventures, intrigue and team-bonding all round, you know? And now it's all over, we're back at school, and suddenly I find that while my back was turned, the rules have all changed and it's like we're four strangers who happen to share a room!" Marlie folded her arms in a sulk, preferring to let outrage dominate. If she let anything else through, she had a feeling she might start crying and in no way was that going to happen.

Lupin listened, surprised at how much her history mirrored his own. He too had been part of a gang of four at school, and he'd thought the bonds of brotherhood would last forever. Then he'd left school and had to watch as they'd gone on to get jobs, get married, in some cases start families, while he got left behind. Admittedly, it hadn't really started falling apart until after Hogwarts, but then Slytherins always did seem to develop early.

"You came back, expecting it to be the four of you taking on the world as it always was before, and now they've gone and made compromises with it behind your back," he said softly.

Marlie froze at his words. "That's it," she whispered. "That's exactly it!" She let her head hang down. "I would still do anything for them," she said, bitterness in her every syllable. "I would willingly share everything I had with them. And they've gone and left me!" She turned away now, feeling the tears starting to well up. I will not cry, she told herself. I will NOT cry!

"They haven't left you," Lupin said gently. He could sense the anguish in her voice, and it was tearing at him inside. No one so gentle and sweet-natured should have to suffer like this. It wasn't even her fault, just the way of the world slowly grinding her down. He wanted to save her, even though he knew it wasn't possible. But if he couldn't spare her from the grindstone entirely, maybe he could direct it so that instead of crushing her, it sculpted her into something even more beautiful. "Marlene, believe me, if you ever find yourself in trouble and need their help, I am sure they will come to your rescue as soon as you say the word. I saw the way the three of you acted when Deanna fell prey to that Dementor. You all flew into action in a second, helping her out. Let me speculate a little here - Luella's the emotional centre of the group, making sure everyone is happy and feeling good. Rianne's the rock on whom the whole thing rests, staying calm in a crisis, working out your plan of action, keeping you all grounded. Deanna, I would hazard a guess, is your fighter, your Dux Bellora, looking out for and warding off any external threats, defending you all against any who'd try and hurt you. And you..." He studied Marlie closely, temporarily lost

for words. "I'd say you were its messenger, its PR person. You're the one who makes the connections, keeps it from getting isolated. You keep it in touch with the outside world. You're the one who's collecting information that might benefit you all, but perhaps more importantly, you're also making sure that the group maintains a high profile and is noticed, that when outside help is needed, the relevant connections will be there. Am I right in guessing that you would be the one with more friends and connections outside the group than any of the others?"

Marlie stared at him in absolute awe. He'd known the four of them less than twenty four hours, and already he knew more about how they worked than they did.

"Yeah," she gasped, thinking of her Clearwater cousins, her friendship with the Weasley twins and by extension the rest of the family, the knowledge of both reserve and first team players granted to her by her Quidditch career, the connections gained by her syndicate leadership and sale of adapted Muggle goods to all and sundry, and in Slytherin, the fact that her running of the sweepstake, former Quidditch team membership and friendships with Draco and Ginny meant that she had far more connections outside their year than any of her dorm mates. Not only that, his descriptions of her friends had been right on the nail. "How the hell did you know all that?" she demanded.

"Easy," Lupin grinned. "The Dementor incident on the train told me all I needed to know. It was a frightening situation of which you had little or no prior warning, and it forced you all to act on instinct. Without even thinking about it, you all fell into your assigned roles. First of all, Deanna tries to get rid of it and succumbs in the process.

That to me says 'warrior'. While not for one moment suggesting that you would have left her to fight it alone, or that you wouldn't have backed her up, the fact that all four of you naturally assumed that it was Deanna's responsibility to lead the attack speaks volumes. Then, after it had gone, and your war leader's down, what happens? Luella is straight away at her side, trying to rouse her, and she stays there, trying to comfort her, trying to bring her back. Whereas Rianne immediately starts trying to put a plan together, taking charge of things, working out a solution. And you, you're the one sent to get help. Even if it wasn't your own idea, the fact that you were the one nominated for the job says it all. That's how the group sees you. And, assuming you didn't whinge or complain or feel that someone else should be doing this, I think that's how you see yourself too."

Marlie was forced to agree. He was absolutely right; as soon as Rianne had snapped at her to go and get Lupin, she'd been off. She hadn't questioned it at all.

"That's right," she said softly. "That is so right, it's scary." She looked up at him, amazed. "Are you a shrink or something?"

Lupin grinned. "Close," he laughed. "I trained as a Muggle counsellor - I've always had an aptitude for working people out. It's what I was doing before I was offered this job. I did some voluntary work now and then, had a little private practice going. It kept me above the breadline."

"Should think so too," Marlie laughed. "You're good." She narrowed her eyes, not at all pleased at Lupin knowing so much about them. "Too good. So, er, Mr. Psychiatrist Person, now that you've worked us all out, how about you tell me what's gone wrong and what I'm supposed to do about it?"

"Not quite so simple as that," said Lupin. "I can certainly offer you an educated guess as to why things are falling apart. And I can point out some possible solutions. But I can't tell you what to do, Marlene. That's for you and you alone to decide."

"Knew a straight answer'd be too much to hope for," Marlie sighed. "Go on then. Hit me with it."

"Very well," Lupin smiled. "Am I right in suggesting that your main source of discontent lies in the fact that not only have your three friends been made prefects, but they're rising to the challenge and taking it seriously?"

"You got that right," Marlie said wearily. "I mean, I knew Ri'd be one, and I wasn't surprised that Lu got a badge even if she was, but Deanna? Didn't expect that. Didn't expect that at all." Marlie looked away, forlorn. "Deanna's the sort of person who gives herself one hundred per cent to whatever she does, y'know? She gets made prefect, she's going to give it the best she's got. But if she gives everything she has to being a prefect, what's left for me? Nothing!"

"And if your other two friends are acting similarly, then they can't give you what you need either," said Lupin.

"Exactly," said Marlie. "I've got nothing left! They're off doing these cool new prefect things, and I'm left on my own, kicking my heels!"

"How very ironic," Lupin said thoughtfully, "that the one responsible for maintaining external connections is the one left feeling lonely."

"Tell me about it," Marlie said in a hollow voice.

"Strange that your other friends aren't compensating for the loss of your dorm mates."

"Not the same," Marlie whispered. "They're in other houses, other years, they have friends of their own, and I've not been through the things with them that I have with Ri, Lu and DT."

"Groups do change, Marlene," Lupin said gently. "No group of friends can sustain the level of emotional intensity you four have had forever. It would burn you all out. Certainly it isn't healthy for you, any of you, to socialise exclusively with each other and no one else. You all need an outlet, other people to deal with who aren't in your clique. Quite apart from anything else, if problems arise, talking only to each other will only serve to destabilise things."

Marlie nodded in agreement. No Slytherin needed telling what happened when you started talking about members of a group with other members of the group behind their backs.

"So, you're saying I need an outlet outside my dorm," said Marlie.

Lupin shook his head. "Not you. Them."

"Them?" Marlie blinked, puzzled. It hadn't before occurred to her that maybe it wasn't her with the problem. This was a new angle on things. She began to think it through. "You mean, they need to socialise and work with other people, and that's why they need to be prefects," said Marlie shakily.

Lupin nodded, smiling. Truly this girl was a marvel. It took some people months to reach this sort of insight.

"That's right. It's not good for them to rely on you all the time. They need their own wider circles of friends and contacts, and I think this is life's way of breaking the four of you up and giving them the opportunity to do things with other people."

Marlie digested this in silence. Lupin watched her, wondering what was going on in there. It was highly unusual to see progress being made so quickly. But then, when someone had survived a Sleeping Death trance, sorting through the depths of their mind proved to be a walk in the park. You deal or you die, was that potion's brutal lesson.

However, if he'd hoped for a blinding flash of inspiration, he was wrong. Sleeping Death had its benefits, but it only focused one on one's own issues. When it came to developing empathy and selflessness, it didn't really help much.

"But I don't mind them hanging around with other people," Marlie argued. "They can still go and do all that! I just want to know why I can't do it with them!"

Lupin sighed. This was going to be harder than he'd thought.

"You can't though, that's the whole point!" he cried, exasperated. "If you're there, the whole thing will fall into the old patterns of you making all the friendly overtures, and when things get tough, you'll threaten to set Deanna on them. Without their messenger and diplomat, the others will need to find a way of surviving on their own."

"They've managed without me before," Marlie felt obliged to point out.

"Yes, in a crisis situation with your life in the balance. That sort of thing forces them to work together as a threesome. But it teaches them nothing about learning how to do it in everyday situations." Lupin felt his conscience twinge as she looked away, downcast. Time to rescue the poor girl's feelings. "Marlene, listen. It's not your fault. You're attractive, brilliant, extrovert, everything about you draws attention. You bring sunshine with you wherever you go, and gods know we all need the sun. But if the sun was out all the time, we'd never be able to see the stars."

"They need to shine too," Marlie said dully. She stared at her feet, eyes almost empty. Lupin ached for her. She looked so lost, poor thing. Her inner fire seemed to have gone out. Had he perhaps been too hard on her?

"So where does that leave me?" she said after a while. "OK, so the sun needs to set so everyone can see the stars. I get that, it's part of nature,

I can do it. But what am I supposed to do overnight while they're out there twinkling? Shine on the other half of the world?"

"In a matter of speaking," said Lupin. This was better. She'd grasped the psychological essentials and her Slytherin pragmatism was getting to grips with things. Excellent news. "How familiar are you with Egyptian mythology?"

Marlie sat upright. She'd not expected a quiz on myths from around the world. She tried to remember the stories her mother had read to her as a child. "Wasn't that where that guy lay down in a box and got sealed in by his jealous brother?"

"That's certainly one of them," Lupin replied. "However, the one I'm thinking of is one regarding the sun god and his daily rounds. Travels through the sky by day, but at night, he sinks into the underworld where he has to fight demons and monsters before finally emerging at dawn."

To his surprise, Marlie just laughed.

"Demons and monsters, eh? Inner or outer? Because, hey, I've fought 'em both."

Lupin rolled his eyes, suddenly feeling a pang of nostalgia for his little Muggle counselling practice, and clients who spoke of demons and monsters in a purely metaphorical sense.

"I don't think you'll need to do anything so drastic," he said weakly. "I think your descent into the underworld will be a purely emotional

endeavour." He decided to change tack. "Tell me, what's your worst fear?"

Marlie opened her mouth to say snakes, of course. However, it occurred to her that although she most certainly didn't like the little and not-so-little buggers (especially the not-so-little ones), she wasn't exactly scared of them either. They weren't what her worst nightmares were made of. They weren't what Sleeping Death had flung her into. They weren't what she'd felt when the Dementor had walked in. She gripped her necklace tightly, suddenly feeling the truth in her very bones.

"I hate being alone," she whispered. "I don't like it when it's dark, when it's quiet, when there's no one around. I feel like everyone's forgotten me."

"Like someone just put your light out, and now no one can see you?" Lupin asked. He'd guessed as much. Solar types never could bear the thought of no one knowing they were there.

Marlie confirmed it by nodding. Lupin laid a hand on her shoulder in an attempt to comfort her, ignoring the Beast growling at the back of his mind.

"That'll never happen," Lupin said softly. "I can't imagine anyone who's met you once not remembering you. I know you've made an impression on me."

Marlie perked up immediately on hearing this. "Really?" she squeaked, the smile back on her face and the inner fire blazing once more.

"Yes, really," Lupin replied, feeling as if a weight had just fallen from his shoulders. Already, the previous night's horrors were but a distant memory. Truly, he'd not been wrong to link her with the sun.

Marlie's grin assumed Cheshire Cat proportions as she sat up and shook her hair back, practically purring. "Cool!" She turned back to him, her manner switching instantly to brisk and businesslike. "So this underworld quest thingy. What do I do?"

"That's something for you to decide," Lupin answered. "It's your quest after all. However, I think I am right in saying that you won't be alone. After all, the sun doesn't die during the night. It merely shines

somewhere else. Likewise, you've already done the inner work. This time, you need to be apart from your friends, it's true, but you needn't be alone. You simply need to find other interests, unexplored talents, and other people on which to shine. You need to get out there and discover things that you never would have noticed if your friends had been around. Who knows, you might just find you've been missing out on something great because of them."

As he spoke, the Knut finally dropped for Marlie. Like most puzzles, the answer, once realised, had been staring her in the face all along. Hadn't she pinpointed two very interesting avenues of investigation only yesterday, before they'd even known who the prefects would be? And weren't they by their very nature things that she couldn't involve the others in? In one of them, she'd done so much without their aid that they

couldn't possibly join in now. And in the other, she wouldn't have much luck if she took her friends everywhere with her, would she now?

"Of course," she gasped, amazed she'd not seen it before. "That's what I need to do! Duh! I am such a div." She got to her feet, grinning ear to ear at a bewildered Professor Lupin. "Thanks, sir! You've been really helpful!"

"Er... any time," said Lupin, getting to his feet. He wasn't sure exactly what had just transpired, but it seemed to have done the trick. Marlie's confidence appeared to have reasserted itself, and he wasn't going to complain. She looked like she could take on the world. As the bell rang for the first lesson and she raced inside, he found himself wishing she

really was a demon slaying sun goddess. He had more than a few of his own that needed seeing to. However, they seemed strangely quiescent at the moment. For a while, he'd forgotten that he was anything other than an ordinary wizard. Lupin decided in that moment that he liked her. He really did. Not in any physical or sexual way of course, although he did admit that she was very pretty. However, in the few minutes he'd spent in her company, he'd been able to leave the Beast behind, the wolf in complete submission. She'd proved more effective than any Wolfsbane. He decided that if the opportunity arose, he'd like to spend rather more time with her. Only if the opportunity arose, of course. She was a student after all. It wouldn't be right to seek her out all the time without a good reason. Besides, there was the little matter of him once having been involved with her mother. He hadn't at first thought that they were that similar, except in looks, and even then Marlene's personal style differed vastly from her mother's. However, as they'd talked, he'd noticed a few things that struck a chord. The same pragmatism regarding personal relations, the same desire to be involved in everything that was going on, a desperate need to be at the centre. True, Marlene not only had to be at the centre, she had to be seen to be at the centre, whereas Melissa would rather nobody else knew exactly where she was or just how much she knew. That aside though, mother and daughter weren't so different deep down after all. It was going to be strange indeed teaching her, although he had no doubts whatsoever that it was going to be enjoyable. He didn't believe in having favourite students - in his mind, they all had potential, they all had their good points, and even the badly behaved ones invariably turned out to be unhappy rather than quintessentially evil. However, if he did ever acquire some, Marlene Lovegood would certainly be one of them.

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The rest of the school were pouring out of the Great Hall as Marlie made her way back inside. Pushing her way through the mob of students, she noticed Deanna crossing the hall, absorbed in a copy of the Daily Prophet, oblivious to the students swarming around her. Even when one bumped into her, she absently waved them away, as opposed to snarling at them to watch where they were going as she usually did. Marlie wondered at this rather out of character behaviour,

but decided not to worry about it. There were more important things to discuss.

"Hey, Tyler," she greeted her, the smile almost covering her nerves. Deanna didn't answer. "Tyler?" Marlie asked, anxiously weaving about in an attempt to get Deanna's attention.

"Hmm?" Deanna glanced up, seemingly wondering if someone was speaking to her. She noticed Marlie standing there. "Oh. Hiya, Marls."

It was as if they'd never argued. Marlie frowned, scrutinising her friend carefully. Was she alright? She looked awfully worried about something. Maybe it had something to do with the paper in her hand which, Marlie noted, had 'Draco Malfoy' inscribed on the top corner.

"What are you reading?" she asked. "Anything exciting?"

"You could say that, yeah." Deanna turned the paper around and showed her the headline. IS NO ONE SAFE?, it screamed out. Underneath it were two photographs, one an official portrait of Caitlin Tyler in her rarely-worn official robes, and the other a picture of the Tyler house. It was barricaded behind DDAE crime scene tape, various mages from the Forensics section were picking over it, and the front window had been completely destroyed.

"Oh my god!" Marlie gasped as she scanned the article. "Sirius Black was at your house? Tyler, are you alright?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'll be fine, don't worry," Deanna smiled, although it seemed as much a mask as Marlie's had been. "The damage's not as

bad as it looks - most of it was caused during the fight he and Mum had."

"Fight?" Marlie squealed, horrified. "Your Mum got in a fight with Sirius Black? Is she alright?"

Deanna nodded, although a shadow lay behind her eyes. "Yeah, she's fine. A few bruises, and she looked knackered when I saw her, but he didn't hurt her, thank Artemis."

"Well, that's one good thing," said Marlie, relieved that no one had been hurt or worse. "I mean, the last person to go up against him got blasted to bits."

"Don't!" Deanna shivered. She really didn't need to be reminded about how dangerous Black actually was, or how near her mother had come to being his fourteenth victim.

"Well he did!" Marlie pointed out. Tact never had been her strong point, but fortunately, she was also rather good at rescuing situations. "But he wasn't an Auror, in fact he wasn't even very powerful from what my mum says. Your mum could take out an entire block if she wanted to, never mind thirteen people."

"Yeah," Deanna smiled, looking fondly at the picture of Caitlin Tyler. "She could." She folded the paper, tucking it under her arm, sombre again. "It's just that it could have turned out so differently, you know? I mean, it's like what Luella said when she found out about it: if he'd turned up a day earlier, Harry and I would have been there. Who knows what might have happened? Would she have been able to fight him if she'd had to worry about us? Would any of us have made it?"

"Hey," Marlie soothed her, stroking her arm. "Don't worry. It turned out alright, didn't it? You weren't there, your mum kicked his arse, and right now he's probably hiding in someone's shed wondering what on earth hit him. Relax, Tyler, I doubt he'll come back. I think he's learnt his lesson."

"I hope so," said Deanna, her fears not entirely conquered, but nevertheless allayed somewhat. She smiled at Marlie, a genuine smile this time. "Thanks. You're a good mate, you know?"

"I try," Marlie grinned. She looked away, remembering why she'd sought out Deanna in the first place. "Um, Tyler? Look, about what I said this morning... I'm sorry I acted the way I did. It was thoughtless and immature, and basically, you were right. You've got a job to do, and I respect that. I was just feeling a bit rejected and left out, that's all. In future, I promise to behave myself." Marlie stopped, wondering where that had come from. True, she'd intended to apologise, but not quite in those words. Certainly not so, well, responsibly. She'd sounded almost like Professor Lupin there.

Deanna was looking rather surprised as well.

"Marlie, are you feeling alright?"

"Er... yeah. Yeah, I'm fine," Marlie laughed, trying to reassure her. "I just went for a walk outside, and it helped clear my head."

"Oh. Right." Deanna was still staring at her very strangely. "Well, I'm glad you're not feeling left out any more, anyway." Her expression softened. "Listen Marls, I don't want you to feel that you're not part of the group any more, or that I'm going to go off and leave you. I'm not. Honestly, Marls, after doing prefect stuff all day, I'll need someone to talk to who has no interest in any of it."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Marlie mused. "I always did wonder what went on in those meetings of theirs. Mike never would tell me. I've decided it must be either world domination or sex."

Deanna burst out laughing. "I wish! No, I suspect it will be nothing more interesting than whose turn it is to bring the biscuits."

Marlie smiled as the two of them linked arms and made their way to Charms. "Well, whatever, you can share all the juicy details with me, safe in the knowledge that it will go no further."

"Than the Clearwaters," Deanna finished with a grin. "And the Weasley twins. And Ginny and friends. And Malfoy. And anyone else who happens to be in the vicinity."

"Hey!" Marlie pouted. "That's not fair!" The mention of her cousin's name sparked off a memory of something else she'd meant to ask about. "And talking of Malfoy, why have you got his Prophet under your arm? What's he done to it? You did check it was a real one, didn't you? I wouldn't put it past him to doctor one and make you think your house had been attacked."

Deanna shook her head, her good mood disappearing. "No, it really happened. Mum came up to the school herself this morning and told me about it. Bit tricky for Malfoy to fake that one," she said, with a lightness she surely did not feel. "No, he gave it to me himself. Half the table were looking at it and talking about it, and when I came in after seeing Mum, he apparently grabbed the paper, shoved it at Lu and told her to go and break it to me before anyone else did."

"Huh?" Marlie stopped dead in her tracks. "Draco did that?" She turned to look at Deanna, who was looking as bemused as she felt. "Why?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. In fact, I was hoping you might know. Did you have a word over the summer or something?"

Marlie shook her head. "No, not really. We just chatted about stuff and played computer games all the time. Nothing out of the ordinary, not for me anyway. It's a bit of a novelty for him, mind."

"But so is shielding a sworn enemy from finding out about something painful," said Deanna thoughtfully. "Do you know, I think you're having a good influence on him. Draco Malfoy may have just performed his very first act of altruism."

"Whoa," Marlie said, awed. "That's intense. We should mark the occasion somehow. Maybe get him a certificate or something."

"Or more likely, get this new-born sense of selflessness on life support before his ego recovers and kills it," Deanna remarked.

"Cynic," Marlie laughed as they made their way into their first lesson.

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It took a little longer for the news to circulate outside Slytherin. After all, it hadn't been made widely known that Harry had been spending the summer at the Tylers', and so no one thought to go rushing up to him with the news. Which is why it was nearly lunchtime when he found out.

Professor McGonagall had already left the classroom, and everyone was getting their things together. On the far side of the room, Lavender and Parvati were huddled in a group with Seamus and Dean, all pouring over a copy of the Prophet. Noticing it, Harry motioned to Ron.

"Any idea what they're looking at? No big stories at the Ministry, are there?"

Ron shook his head. "None that I know of. Dad's not said anything to me."

"How would he, if it only happened yesterday?" said Hermione irritably. She'd been edgy all morning for reasons best known to herself. "I'll ask, shall I?" Without waiting for an answer, she went over and asked to have a look. Harry watched as she read the front page. Her eyes widened as she read, and she clapped a hand to her mouth. Harry

didn't like the look of that at all. Had something terrible happened? Well, he'd soon know. She was coming back, with the paper in her hand.

"Harry," she gasped. "Oh, Harry!" She flung her arms around him. Harry shot a glance at Ron, whose expression just read 'don't ask me'. Now Harry really was concerned. Had someone died?

"What is it?" he asked. "What happened?"

"Sirius Black!" she whispered, letting him go. She looked ashen-faced. Harry didn't think he'd ever seen her look so shocked.

"What's he done?" he asked. "Has he killed someone?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, but... Look!" She passed the paper to him. Harry took it, Ron standing behind to read it over his shoulder.

"Bloody hell!" he heard Ron exclaim. "What happened to the place? There's nothing left of that window!"

"Oh Ron, never mind the bloody window!" Hermione cried. "Caitlin Tyler could have been killed!"

Harry scanned down the page, searching for news of Caitlin's fate. He breathed a sigh of relief to see that Caitlin had been able to fight him off and was unharmed, although he wasn't so relieved to discover that she'd not been able to prevent him escaping. Sirius Black was still on the loose, it seemed. He just hoped Caitlin had scared him enough to make him think twice about returning. He didn't like to think about her having to face him again. Up until now, Sirius Black had been an abstract danger, out there but not present enough to do any harm. Seeing the result of his rampage in black and white had a way of making it real. He really was dangerous, he really was out there, he really could attack. He had attacked, and the fact that the target had

been someone he cared about, at a place he'd called home, however briefly, only made it worse. If the attack had taken place a day earlier...

"It could have been me," he whispered.

Ron went very white on hearing this. "Oh gods," he gasped. "You were there, weren't you? Over the summer."

"I was there only yesterday," Harry said, shaking.

"You must be the luckiest boy on the planet," Ron said, staring at Harry in amazement. "I mean, to have him miss you by a day..."

"Yeah, guess I must be-" Harry stopped mid-sentence. What had Ron meant, 'to have him miss you'? Was he implying...? "Wait a minute. He wasn't after me, was he?"

Ron went very quiet, exchanging nervous glances with Hermione, the kind of glances that meant 'oh help, he's guessed' and 'are you going to break it to him or am I?' Harry realised with a jolt that Sirius Black was indeed after him personally.

"He is, isn't he?" Harry glared at them. "Were either of you planning on telling me, or were you going to wait until he stormed Gryffindor Tower in the night?"

"Harry, please don't be angry," said Hermione weakly.

"We didn't want to worry you," said Ron, looking guilty. "I mean, we're not meant to know either - I only found out because I overheard Mum and Dad talking about it. That's why you were sent to live with Caitlin Tyler - the Ministry didn't think you'd be safe enough with Muggles."

Harry privately thought that it had been more to do with him blowing up Aunt Marge and the Dursleys not wanting him back in the house than Sirius Black, but he decided not to press the point. He supposed Ron had a point - if he'd known Sirius Black had been after him personally, he'd never have been able to relax all summer. But that didn't answer his other questions.

"But why?" Harry asked. "Why's he after me?"

"Oh, Harry, use your brain!" Hermione sighed. "Black used to work for You-Know-Who, didn't he? And, well, whose fault is it that You-Know-Who's no longer around?"

"Mine," said Harry softly. His heart sank as he went on from that to draw the obvious conclusion. "Oh god, he must blame me for his getting sent to Azkaban. That must be why he escaped, he must want revenge." The thought chilled him to the core. No wonder Caitlin had been so worried when he'd disappeared and why she'd been so relieved to find him. It also explained why she'd made him promise not to put himself in danger this year. She must have known too, but not wanted to tell him, or been told not to.

Ron nodded in confirmation. "They say that he read an article in the paper that mentioned you. In the nights before he escaped, he was heard saying 'He's at Hogwarts, he's at Hogwarts'. The Ministry think he must have decided to get his revenge."

"Harry, we're sorry we didn't tell you earlier," Hermione said gently. "But we didn't want you to worry. After all, we thought you'd be safe enough at the Tylers. Or at least, we did up until now." She indicated the newspaper.

"Don't worry about it," said Harry. "I'm rather glad I didn't know sooner - at least this place is fairly safe. Caitlin must have relaxed her defences after seeing us off. She mustn't have thought that he might come for her anyway."

Hermione frowned, evidently pondering this. "That's a thought," she said. "Black must know term starts on the first, after all. So why would he have gone to the Tyler house after you'd left for Hogwarts if he was looking for you? He can't have been

after information - everyone knows where the Hogwarts Express goes from. And there's surely easier hostages to take than Caitlin Tyler."

"Who cares?" snapped Ron. "Hermione, this is Sirius Black we're talking about here. He's You-Know-Who's right hand man, and he killed thirteen people just because he could. He's spent twelve years in Azkaban, and we all know that's enough to drive anyone crazy. He's not going to let a little thing like reason get in his way, is he?"

"But didn't you say that your dad reckoned Sirius Black seemed almost normal in Azkaban?" Hermione countered.

"Exactly!" said Ron triumphantly. "He must be nuts to survive there!"

Hermione riposted with a scathing comment about male logic. Before long, full-scale bickering had ensued. Harry let them argue as they made their way to lunch. He was too busy thinking about Sirius Black. It was a scary prospect, no doubt about that. However, it didn't frighten him as much as Ron and Hermione had feared. After all, You-Know-Who had been trying to kill him since he was a baby. He was used to danger by now. Besides, he was at Hogwarts, with Albus Dumbledore, fifty Dementors and all the castle's wards and protection charms to keep Sirius Black out. He'd be perfectly safe here. Wouldn't he?

He was pulled back to reality by the sound of Hermione's cry of exasperation.

"For heaven's sake, Ron, of course he's not going to die!"

Ron didn't sound so sure.

"But you heard what Trelawney said..."

"Yes, and I also heard what Professor McGonagall said, and if it's a choice between her and that mad old bat, I know who I'd choose!" Hermione sounded quite annoyed.

"What are you two talking about?" Harry asked, not entirely sure he wanted to know the answer to that one.

"Nothing to worry about, Harry," said Hermione.

"Divination," said Ron.

"He seems to think you're going to die," said Hermione with a tut of annoyance. "For some reason, he seems to think Trelawney might actually be right." Harry noticed that Hermione, normally so respectful of teachers, had dropped Trelawney's title.

"But Hermione, if Sirius Black's after him, he might!" said Ron anxiously.

"Exactly," said Hermione firmly. "She's just picked the student most likely to get killed so as to maximise her chances. Besides, notice she never gave a date. Everyone dies eventually, Ron."

Ron backed down, although he still seemed worried.

"Suppose," he said. "I mean, those tea leaves could have been anything."

"Precisely," Hermione smiled.

"I mean," said Ron, gaining confidence, "it's not like Harry's actually seen a Grim or anything in real life." He stopped, his confidence slipping a little. "You haven't, have you?"

"Don't know," said Harry. "What does a Grim look like?"

"A big black dog," said Hermione. "Normally seen in graveyards."

"A big black dog?" Harry repeated. "Yeah, I've seen one of them. It was hanging outside the Tyler house the night I ran away. It came back a couple of times while I was there. Rather sweet, to be honest. What?" Ron was staring at him as if he'd just admitted to killing children.

"YOU SAW A GRIM!" he screamed, pointing at Harry and leaping back. Nearby, a couple of passing Ravenclaws backed off nervously.

"It was not a Grim!" said Harry irritably. "It was a perfectly normal stray."

Neither Ron nor Hermione paid any attention.

"Oh gods, oh gods, oh gods," Ron was whimpering. "You saw a Grim! Gods, Harry, you're going to die!"

"Ron, be quiet, he is not going to die," Hermione snapped. She immediately fell into her usual scholarly way of thinking. "Hmm, wonder what seeing a Grim foretells. Apart from death, obviously."

"It was not a Grim!" Harry cried impatiently. "It was a perfectly normal dog!"

Hermione continued as if he'd not said a word. "I wonder where Grims would be in the library, Magical Creatures or Omens? Any ideas, Ron?"

"Omens," Ron whispered. "They're omens of death, harbingers of doom, not real animals."

"Well, this one was real enough," said Harry. "Certainly smelt like it anyway."

"They all smell foul!" Ron cried. "It's part of their sinister aura! They're demon dogs from the infernal realms, they all reek of sulphur. It's a mark of their foulest evil!"

"Ron," said Harry, in the voice of one trying to explain things to a simpleton, "it licked my face!"

If Harry had thought that this would allay Ron's fears, he was immediately proved wrong. Ron went pale and let out a strangled scream.

"YOU LET IT TOUCH YOU!!" he shrieked. By now, even fellow Gryffindors were giving him a wide berth, as Ron turned into a gibbering wreck.

"Ooh, that's not good," said Hermione. Now even she was starting to look anxious. "You should never let infernal denizens of the netherworld touch you, anything could happen. You might get sucked into a dark portal to the Quor'Toth Realm or turned into a mutant or something."

"It was not a infernal denizen of the netherworld!" Harry cried, wondering if they'd ever believe him. "It was a perfectly ordinary stray dog!" He cast about for a way of proving it to them, and then it hit him. Of course - he wasn't the only one who'd seen the dog, was he?

"Look, I'll prove it if you like," he snapped. "Deanna saw it too, she'll back me up."

"Tyler saw it too?" Ron gasped. He looked like he was on the edge of a heart attack.

"Did she touch it as well?" asked Hermione, sounding more curious than anything else.

"She had its head on her lap," said Harry. Next to him, Ron let out an unearthly wail more disturbing than anything related to Grims. Harry made a point of ignoring him.

"That's not good," said Hermione nervously. "Still, at least neither of you fed it. You should never give food to a demonic manifestation - it binds it to this plane and to you."

"Er... we might have given it a few leftovers," Harry admitted, by now having a few fleeting misgivings about the creature. Suppose it really had been a demonic spirit?

What, a demonic spirit who begs outside your home for left over bacon, and rolls over to have its stomach tickled? Really dangerous creature you have there, Harry. He shook himself, ignoring Hermione's concern and Ron's hysterics. It was not a Grim, just a perfectly ordinary stray with a fondness for bacon, nothing more. And Deanna would prove it. Now all he had to do was find her.

Fortunately, it wasn't hard to do. They'd arrived in the Entrance Hall by this time, and by a lucky coincidence, Deanna just happened to be making her own way across to the Great Hall at that very moment. Breathing a sigh of relief, Harry ran over to her. She was on her own.

"Deanna, you can tell them, can't you?" he gasped as he ran over to her. Deanna looked at him in surprise as he staggered over.

"Tell them what?" the fifth year asked, wondering if Harry was alright.

"About the Grim- dog," Harry corrected himself. Great, now even he was starting to think it was a Grim. Things were obviously starting to get to him. "You know, the dog we saw at your mum's over the summer. For some reason, these two seem to think it's a Grim."

"A Grim?" Deanna stared at Ron and Hermione's faces, wondering how on earth they drew that conclusion. "Why?"

Ron and Hermione looked at each other. Now that they had to actually explain their reasoning, it dawned on them that the evidence really wasn't that convincing. Hermione in particular was beginning to feel embarrassed that she'd even thought about taking Professor Trelawney seriously.

"Professor Trelawney said she saw a Grim in Harry's tea leaves and predicted he was going to die," said Hermione, taking care to pin the blame firmly on Trelawney. "Then Harry said he'd seen a black dog over the holidays and Ron thought..."

"What?!" Ron interrupted fiercely. "You were the one talking about demonic manifestations!"

"I was supplying information!" Hermione snapped, irritated that her sceptical front was slipping. "It's what I do! I'm Information Girl, you're Boy Who Falls Apart In A Crisis!"

"I am not!" Ron started to say, before Deanna called things to a halt.

"QUIET!" Deanna yelled, unable to take any more arguing. She recalled all the petty bickering of years past with Marlie and inwardly shuddered. Had they really been that irritating? She vowed there and then never to bicker pointlessly ever again. She shot withering glares at both Ron and Hermione, neither of whom were able to meet her eyes.

"You've never taken Divination before, so just this once, I shall forgive your extreme gullibility," she said softly. "However, for future reference, let me tell you that the received wisdom in Slytherin House is that Professor Trelawney is a complete fraud. Her Inner Eye could do with testing, her Second Sight appears to be short, and the general consensus is that you can get more reliable predictions out of a Magic 8 Ball."

Harry couldn't resist a snigger at this. Deanna was saying much the same thing as McGonagall had earlier, although more openly and far more wittily. Ron in particular was now looking rather embarrassed.

"For the record," Deanna continued silkily, "the dog that Harry and I saw was not a Grim. Grims, if you bother to read the literature carefully, are meant to be terrifying and sinister harbingers of doom. This dog, on the other hand, was about as terrifying and sinister as Bambi. I have seen kittens that were more dangerous than that animal. The phrase 'great big softie' could have been invented to describe it. It was not a Grim. Of that I am sure. Rest assured that neither Harry nor I are going to be dying in the near future."

Harry turned on his friends with a triumphant grin. "See?" he said, safe in the knowledge that they would not be disagreeing with Deanna Tyler's expert opinion in a hurry. "Told you it wasn't a Grim."

"Yes, Ron, I said you were overreacting," said Hermione, apparently forgetting her own fears that Harry might have a demon dog stalking him.

"It might have been!" Ron protested. "You can't be too careful with these things. My great-uncle saw one once and twenty four hours later, he was dead!"

"Well, there you are then," said Hermione promptly. "People see one and die of fright. They're a self-fulfilling prophecy. Come on, let's get some lunch. You coming, Harry?"

"In a second," said Harry. "I just want a quick word with Deanna. See you both in a while." He watched them go before turning back to Deanna. "I heard about what happened," he said, lowering his voice. "Are you alright?"

Deanna nodded, her outward confidence disappearing. "Yeah, I think so," she said wearily. "It's just a bit of a shock, that's all. Mum's fine anyway, that's the main thing. If he'd hurt her..." She didn't finish the sentence. Harry guessed that the possibility of losing her mother wasn't something she wanted to think about. He didn't blame her - he was far too familiar with being an orphan himself to wish it on anyone else.

"Hey, don't worry," he tried to comfort her. "She made it, didn't she? He killed all those other people but he couldn't kill Caitlin, could he? She's tough, your mum. She won't be dying any time soon, I don't think."

Deanna smiled, squeezing his shoulder. "Thanks, Harry," she said, less depressed than she had been. "After all, I expect she's been in worse situations before now. It's just this is the first I've known about, so obviously it seems shocking. And Sirius Black, he's dangerous, I know, but it could be that everyone's exaggerated how powerful he is. Maybe we're all so scared of the idea of him, we're crediting the real Black with being more threatening than he actually is."

"Could be," said Harry. However, that didn't explain why Caitlin Tyler, not a witch who scared easily and someone who'd known Sirius Black well, had been so fearful for his and Deanna's safety. Which reminded him of what he'd learnt this morning...

"Deanna," he said cautiously, "did you know Sirius Black escaped Azkaban because he was after me?"

Harry soon had his answer. Deanna stared at him, horrified, for the briefest of moments before exploding.

"He what?" she shrieked. "Because of you??" She clapped her hands to her mouth before calming down. "Oh gods," she whispered. "No, I didn't, Harry. I had no idea, Mum never really said anything to me about why he escaped. I just assumed he'd escaped to look for Voldie and that we were just at risk because Mum's a top Auror. I had no idea it was personal."

"Nor did I until this morning," said Harry. He proceeded to tell Deanna what Ron and Hermione had told him earlier. Deanna listened in a stunned silence.

"Your mum knew too," he finished. "She made me promise not to do anything dangerous or stupid this year. She must know he's after me."

"No wonder she wanted you with us so badly," Deanna said softly. Her shock seemed to have faded a little, and she no longer looked surprised. "It explains a lot," she said to herself, before returning her attention to Harry. "How are you taking it?" she asked.

"Not too bad," Harry sighed. "I mean, it's logical when you think about it, and it's not like I'm not used to people trying to kill me, after all." He frowned, the nagging feeling of doubt that had been at the back of his head all morning finally revealing itself. "I'm just trying to work out why no one told me, and why on earth people are warning me not to do anything dangerous or risky. Surely someone must have worked out that I'm far less likely to go and do anything silly if I *know* that there's a maniac who's trying to kill me? Especially your mum of all people."

Deanna had to agree. Caitlin Tyler had long believed that it was what you didn't know that got you killed, and it didn't seem in character for her to keep information like that from Harry for no good reason. True, Caitlin might have been ordered not to tell him, but Deanna didn't seriously believe that one for a second. Her mother had never shrunk from disobeying orders before when there was a good reason and little chance of her getting punished for it. Which meant that there must be a good reason for her keeping quiet. Deanna wasn't at all sure she wanted to know what it was.

"I don't know, Harry," she said sincerely. "But I'm sure Mum has her reasons. Remember, she knows stuff we don't, and I'm sure she'd

have said unless there was a very good reason for her not to have done."

"Yeah, but what counts as a good reason?" Harry asked, wondering what on earth could justify taking such a risk.

"Maybe if she thought that telling you would put you in more danger than not telling you," said Deanna slowly, belying the speed with which her mind was leaping to conclusions. "Say, if she thought that knowing he was after you might make you more likely to endanger yourself."

Harry gave this some thought. It made sense, and yet he couldn't for the life of him work out how it would work out in practice. "But how would that work?" he said stubbornly. "I mean, I'm hardly likely to go after him myself, am I?"

"Well, I don't know," said Deanna, troubled. Her thoughts were leading her in a certain direction and she wasn't at all sure she liked where they were heading. "I mean, it depends why he's after you, I suppose."

"That's obvious, surely," said Harry, beginning to wonder about the Slytherin's intelligence. "Voldemort lost his power because of me, didn't he? Black's in Azkaban because of me. Of course he wants revenge. Why else would he be after me?"

"Oh I never said that wasn't why he was after you," said Deanna thoughtfully. "I'm just not sure it's the only reason he's after you."

"What other reason could there be?" Harry asked, confused. Did there really need to be another one? After all, from what Ron had said, Sirius Black didn't seem to need a reason at all to kill someone. It was only

logical that if there was a good reason, there really only needed to be one.

"I don't know what exactly," said Deanna, still looking him over very curiously, "but I think there might be more to it than we think. And I'm certain that Mum knows, if not the full story, then certainly most of it."

Harry digested this in silence. What more could there possibly be to know? Sirius Black had been a violent and treacherous follower of Voldemort, been caught and sent to prison because of something Harry did, and now he was out for revenge. End of story. However, the Slytherin in him was stronger than people gave it credit for, and its instincts were whispering that Deanna might just have a point.

"Do you think we should ask her?" Harry said, now intensely curious himself as to what they weren't being told.

Deanna shook her head. "No. No point. I'm sure that if we needed to know, she'd have told us. I'm sure she'll tell us in her own good time, when she's ready."

Harry doubted this very much - if they didn't need to know now, with Black at large and dangerous, then they were hardly likely to need to know once he was safely back in Azkaban. However, there was very little he could do about it now. Shrugging, he followed Deanna in to lunch.

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Lunch passed, and the school started gathering for the afternoon's lessons. First class for the Gryffindor and Slytherin third years was Care of Magical Creatures with Hagrid. Among them, trying to ignore Pansy Parkinson's cooing and Crabbe and Goyle's simian grunts, was Draco Malfoy. Contrary to Deanna's remarks that morning, Draco's sense of selflessness was not dead yet, nor was it even in danger. At that moment in time, it was working harmoniously with his sense of self-preservation as he tried to think of an honourable way in which to get off the Slytherin team. Resigning was the first option, of course, but he somehow didn't think Lucius would be too pleased if, after paying a fortune for seven Nimbus 2001s to get his son on the Quidditch team, said son then turned round and said he'd changed his mind. Especially not if it was in favour of his half-blood cousin.

Option number two was getting himself sacked, but he had an inkling that might not go down too well either. Besides, the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff line-ups were nowhere near good enough for him to be able to successfully throw games, and no way was he deliberately losing to Potter and his Magnificent Seven. He'd like to be able to live with himself afterwards.

Which just left option three - injury. Now that looked more promising. Obviously a real injury was out of the question, but it might just be possible to fake one, or at least, acquire a relatively minor (and painless) one and hype it up. It only had to last long enough for Marlie to win against Gryffindor in November after all. After that, he could return to full health, admit that Marlie was a far better Seeker than him and should keep her place, and tell his father that he'd decided Seeker wasn't his strongest position anyway and that he'd rather be a Chaser. Everyone would be happy, and his father would have the consolation of knowing that his son might be playing again next season, and in his old position at that. Problem solved and absolutely no blame would attach to him. Perfect.

The only question was how to go about getting such an injury. It had to look convincing, that was the problem. It also had to be public, with witnesses who would testify that it wasn't his fault, and it had to look like someone else had inflicted it or caused it in some way. A Potions accident was a possibility, although he swiftly discounted that one after realising that Snape would be there. He'd be mad to try anything with him watching, and there was the added problem that Snape was a

former mediwizard who could heal virtually anything, and who would certainly be able to tell a minor injury from a major trauma. Another possibility was taunting Ron Weasley into picking a fight with him, but the chances were that they'd get stopped before either could do any damage. That was if Weasley didn't end up hexing himself again like he had last time.

He was dragged back into full consciousness by Crabbe nudging him in the arm.

"Hey, Malfoy, snap out of it. We're here."

"Hmm?" Draco had been so lost in his thoughts, he'd quite forgotten where he was supposed to be. He was aware of being outside, but beyond that he wasn't entirely sure. Outside? he thought to himself. Why am I outside, shouldn't I be in lessons? "You know, here," Crabbe repeated, rolling his eyes at Goyle and Pansy. "Care of Magical Creatures, with that great oaf you think should have been kicked out long ago." He turned to Goyle with a sigh. "Bloody hell, Goyle, and people think we're thick."

"I know where we are!" Draco snapped, stung by the implication that he was slow on the uptake, justified though it had been on this occasion. "I just had my mind on other things, that's all." He forced himself to roll his eyes, knowing that a quick subject change was the only thing that would cover him. "Gods, can you imagine, that hulking great lump teaching? One can only guess what sort of thing he has in store for us."

"Do you think it'll be anything cute?" Pansy asked nervously. It was a well known fact that Pansy had only volunteered for this course because it was light on the homework and offered a chance to handle possibly cute and cuddly animals. Of course, that had been before they'd known Hagrid would be teaching them.

"Cute?" Crabbe laughed. "Pan, you've heard what he's like. He thinks Manticores are sweet and gentle household pets. Cute and fluffy it won't be. We'll probably end up raising dragons or something."

"Oh I don't know," Draco mused idly. "Dragons are kind of cute... what?" The others, even Goyle who normally acted as if Draco could do no wrong, were all staring at him rather strangely.

"Malfoy," said Crabbe gently, "are you feeling alright? Didn't hit your head on something, did you?"

Oh for gods' sake. This was what he'd wanted to avoid. No choice now but to tough it out and hope for the best.

"What?" he snapped. "They're a proud and noble species. They're on our coat of arms. Lest we forget, I was named after the species. I happen to like them, OK?"

"OK, OK," said Crabbe, backing off. "Dragons are lovely. You're absolutely right, Malfoy." He exchanged nervous glances with the other two before, to Draco's relief, moving the conversation on to what sort of thing they'd be studying this year.

Draco took the opportunity to step back a little. Now that he no longer had to watch his words, the conversation had given him an idea. He'd been looking for the opportunity to acquire a genuine yet blamefree injury. This looked like his chance. Dangerous animals, and an inexperienced teacher who couldn't watch his every move and had no healing skills of his own - it was the perfect combination. Now all he had to do was wait for his opportunity.

It was not long in coming. Draco took care to keep up the usual arrogant sneer from the outset, and it wasn't long before he'd been able to get Hagrid flustered. Excellent work, Draco. He's off guard and might conveniently forget to issue adequate safety warnings. Now for Phase Two.

The Magical Creatures they were to be studying today turned out to not only meet Draco's expectations, they surpassed them. Hippogriffs. Big Hippogriffs. With beaks and talons the size of chainsaws, and egos the size of Hogwarts. Draco felt like dancing. Was Fate smiling on him or what?

Hagrid was beaming at the animals as if they were his children.

"Now," he said, "firs' thing yeh gotta know abou' Hippogriffs is they're proud. Easily offended, Hippogriffs are. Don' never insult one, cause it might be the last thing yeh do."

Draco could easily have burst into song at these words. Fate was not only smiling on him, it seemed, she was leaning up against a door frame in a sheer nightdress with a tub of chocolate body paint in her arms.

A demonstration followed, and true to form, Potter volunteered for it.

"Show-off," Draco muttered to himself, inwardly cursing himself for not having leapt in there before him.

"Never mind, Malfoy," he heard Crabbe mutter in his ear. "Potter might get himself killed or something, you never know."

"We can but hope," Draco murmured, watching carefully. Safely annoying a Hippogriff was only possible if you first knew how to approach one properly, and Potter almost certainly would, damn him. Although, if he didn't, it would at least make for an entertaining lesson.

Unfortunately, Harry survived the encounter, and actually managed to take the Hippogriff on a flight around the paddock. Draco could only grit his teeth in fury. That should have been me! he raged. I should have been the one riding a Hippogriff. Potter always gets the breaks, it's not fair!

Patience, Draco, his voice of wisdom soothed him. You're not meant to be riding it around the paddock, you're meant to be pissing it off. Remember? Draco remembered alright, although that didn't stop him wanting to curse both his parents, and Marlie to boot, for forcing him to do this in the first place. Still, no help for it now. Time to put his plan into action.

With Crabbe and Goyle behind him, Draco made straight for the Hippogriff that Harry had been riding, on the basis that if it had liked Potter, then it would probably take an immediate dislike to him. Life had a way of working out like that in Draco's experience.

"Always the one Potter liked for you, isn't it, Malfoy?" Crabbe remarked as Draco faced the beast.

"What can I say, we obviously have similar tastes," Draco said idly, as he bowed to the animal. For a few seconds, nothing happened. Crabbe and Goyle, at a safe distance, watched as Draco faced off with the Hippogriff. Draco gritted his teeth in anticipation. This could be painful.

"Shouldn't he be backing away around now?" Goyle whispered to Crabbe nervously.

"Should be," Crabbe whispered back. "If he's got any sense."

Goyle looked back at Crabbe in a way that suggested that their boss had been displaying a singular lack of that particular quality just lately. Both boys turned to look at Draco again, their family loyalty to the Malfoys battling it out with the desire not to get any nearer to that Hippogriff than they had to.

Then, to Crabbe and Goyle's relief, and Draco's disappointment, the Hippogriff bowed back. Behind him, Draco could hear Crabbe and Goyle let out the breath they'd been holding. For the briefest of moments, he felt a twinge of guilt at the worry that this plan was going to cause his friends. Then the thought occurred to him that they just didn't want to face the wrath of their fathers, not to mention his, when

word got out they'd failed to protect the Malfoy heir. That had the effect of stiffening his resolve. Reaching out, he patted the Hippogriff on the beak.

"What were you worried about, you two?" he called to them cheerfully. They were both standing as far away as they could manage without looking like cowards. "This is easy!"

Crabbe and Goyle were both looking rather concerned.

"Um, Malfoy, should you really be ruffling his feathers the wrong way like that?" Goyle asked nervously.

"Yeah, Malfoy, you heard what Hagrid said," said Crabbe. "You've got to show respect to these creatures."

"Ah, forget Hagrid," said Draco scornfully. "What does he know?"

"More than us?" said Goyle. Draco ignored him, speaking now to the Hippogriff. It was now or never.

"I bet you're not dangerous at all, are you?" he purred, keeping his voice low enough so that no one would overhear, yet loud enough for the animal to hear. "Are you, you great ugly brute?"

That did it. Draco's plan erupted into fruition with frightening swiftness. The Hippogriff screeched in fury and slashed Draco's arm with its beak, slicing it open from wrist to shoulder, shredding his robes in the process. Draco couldn't stop himself screaming from the pain. It hurt far more than he'd thought it would.

He was vaguely aware of Pansy screaming in the background, and Crabbe, or was it Goyle, shouting his name. He was also aware of Hagrid wrestling the Hippogriff back into its collar and kneeling beside him. He could still hear the beast screeching in the background, desperate to avenge the insult to its pride. I'm sorry, Draco thought. Despite himself, he'd actually taken a liking to the animals. Indeed, he'd had doubts about going through with things. Part of him had wanted to leave it, wait until next week and try it with an animal he didn't care about. However, he had to do it sooner or later, and Marlie would need time to train if she was going to make the best of her opening match. He only hoped that one day he could make it up to the beast.

Right now, however, the pain in his arm was directing his mind on to other topics, such as the fact that the human body had eight pints of blood, and three of his appeared to be pouring out of his arm in a Niagara-esque torrent. How much blood did you have to lose, exactly, before things started getting fatal?

"I'm dying," he heard himself cry out. "It's killed me!" Oh, nice one Malfoy. That didn't make you sound like a petulant child at all, did it?

"Yer not dying," he heard Hagrid saying as he picked him up and began running towards the school. "I gotta get him to the hospital wing - yeh'll see yerselves back to school, won't yeh?"

Draco wasn't aware of anything by now. Losing consciousness, the last thing he remembered was being carried in a pair of huge arms, a dull ache in his arm, racing across the fields travelling who knew where.

Chapter Nine Slytherin Family Values

An indeterminate amount of time later, Draco finally regained consciousness, his mind sufficiently ready to face the prospect of never being able to use his arm again. Oddly enough, he didn't seem to be in pain. In fact, he actually felt quite warm and comfortable, tucked up in a soft, warm bed with the starched sheets smelling faintly of bleach that could only belong to Hogwarts hospital wing. Odd how it always smelt of disinfectant even though no such Muggle chemicals were ever used there. Snape had once told him the reason for this, but he couldn't remember it now. Draco's mind was more concerned with the sensations in his arm.

It no longer felt like acid was eating it away from the outside. It now felt like a horde of insects was eating it away from the inside. What is wrong with Pomfrey? the thought ran through his mind, struggling to get through a wall of what felt like Muggle cotton wool. It's just a flesh wound, she can heal these surely. This was indeed true, which lead inevitably to the sobering thought that if she couldn't heal it, maybe things were worse than he'd assumed. He opened his eyes.

As he'd suspected, he was indeed in a bed in the hospital wing with privacy screens around it. Although it was still daylight, the curtains had been drawn, and the only light of any use was a standard issue bedside lantern on the table next to him. His uniform had been removed and he was clad in a pair of blue flannelette pyjamas with owls on them that he realised with a start were a pair that could only have come from his bedroom in Malfoy Manor.

However, he was not left wondering long how they had got there. On the chair next to his bed was a blonde woman dressed in very expensive looking purple robes. She was examining her exquisitely manicured fingernails with the eyes of an artist surveying her creation for flaws. Not that there would be any. He knew her and her abilities far too well for that.

"Mum!" he whispered, for indeed it was she.

Narcissa looked up, and smiled. If she'd been concerned about her only son's wellbeing, she didn't show it.

"Hello, Draco," she said coolly. "And how are you?"

"I'm not sure," said Draco, looking at his arm. It was swathed in bandages, giving no clues as to its condition other than the infernal itching. "It itches."

"So it would," Narcissa observed. "What with your allergy and all."

"Allergy?" This was news to Draco. He didn't know he had any allergies. "What allergy?"

"Your Hippogriff allergy of course!" Narcissa rolled her eyes. "One touch of a Hippogriff, and your skin just flares up. And if one slices your arm open, well..."

Draco rubbed his eyes with his good hand. Was he actually awake or was the blood loss making him delirious? It was difficult to tell.

"Mother," he said, deciding to assume this was reality for the moment, "I don't have a Hippogriff allergy."

Narcissa just rolled her eyes. "Yes, you do, Draco. Your arm flared up as soon as it touched you. No, no argument," she said, forestalling his next question. "I'm your mother, I know these things. But enough of that. What happened out there, Draco?"

The habit of a lifetime was too strong for him to resist. He launched straight into the excuses he'd had prepared.

"The Hippogriff, Mum! It just went nuts! One minute I was standing there talking to it, and the next it just attacked me for no-"

"The truth, Draco!" Narcissa's voice cut through the lies, all traces of a smile gone now. "What really happened?"

There was no arguing with that tone of voice. Subdued, Draco confessed, telling her the entire story of what happened between him and Buckbeak, and why he'd done what he had. She listened in silence, and when he'd finished, he was surprised to see her looking at him with more tenderness than she'd shown since he woke.

"I thought as much," she said gently. "Draco, you could have been seriously injured, you know that?"

"Yeah, that was the general idea," he grumbled. "How else was I going to get off the team?"

Narcissa had to admit there weren't many other practical solutions that wouldn't have driven Lucius up the wall. "Well Draco, your ingenuity is commendable." Her eyes narrowed. "Don't do it again!"

"I won't," Draco promised. With that dealt with, he began to wonder exactly why he'd never been told about this allergy before. "So, Mother. This allergy of mine. How come you're being so matter of fact about it, and how come you never mentioned it before?"

"Because you never had it before," Narcissa murmured, lowering her voice. "I knew what you'd done and why as soon as I heard what happened. I also knew that your injury could be healed in a second by any half-trained healer. So I gave you the symptoms of an allergic reaction while Pomfrey wasn't looking."

"You did what!" Draco demanded. He really couldn't believe his mother sometimes.

"Don't look at me like that!" Narcissa snapped. "It's not severe, and it will heal. You'll just be off sick for a few days, that's all. Oh, and unable to do anything especially physical or sporty until at least November, say."

Draco was not mollified. "I still can't believe you gave me an allergy!" he sulked. "Your own son!"

Narcissa was having none of it. "Draco, you wanted an injury that would get you out of Quidditch, and I gave you one. Stop complaining. If you don't want these things, don't put yourself in situations where you're likely to get them."

Draco fingered his arm, still disturbed that his mother would even consider doing this to him. "It's not permanent, is it?" he asked. "I mean, I'm not going to get this reaction every time I go near a Hippogriff, am I?"

Narcissa shook her head. "No. You'll be fine in future. Assuming of course that you're not going to make a habit out of doing stupid things like insulting Hippogriffs to their face?" She raised an immaculate eyebrow. They weren't plucked; they didn't need to be. Narcissa's features had long ago learnt that it went better for them if they arranged themselves in an aesthetically pleasing manner before Narcissa did it for them.

Draco had also absorbed much the same lesson before he could even walk. "No, Mother."

"Excellent." Narcissa turned away, raising her wand. "Now, with that out of the way, let's see if your father's finished with Severus and your headmaster yet."

"Father?" Although Marlie's influence had caused him to start calling Narcissa 'Mum' on occasion, nothing on earth would ever have persuaded him to refer to Lucius as anything other than Father. "He's here?"

"Of course," said Narcissa. "He was most put out when he heard about the accident. I think he was more affected than I was."

"He would be," murmured Draco. Despite outside appearances, Lucius was actually the more emotional of the two Malfoy parents, and

although he had a reputation as a stern disciplinarian, he was generally more affectionate to Draco than Narcissa was. It wasn't that Narcissa didn't care, she just didn't like emotions in general. They tended to mess up her mascara.

"Where is he then?" Draco asked, looking around. Strange, that Lucius was nowhere to be seen. The elder Malfoy tended to take a sometimes too active interest in his only child's wellbeing, and it was unusual for him not to be there.

Narcissa answered by producing her wand and lifting the Silencing Spells that had been cast around the bed. His father's voice immediately came across loud and clear.

"WHAT WERE YOU THINKING OF, LETTING DANGEROUS ANIMALS LIKE THAT NEAR CHILDREN?? SOMEONE COULD HAVE BEEN KILLED!!"

Then Professor Snape's voice.

"Fortunately no one was, Lucius. Draco's injury's not life-threatening - he'll be fine. Worse incidents have occurred in my Potions lessons, and you're not suggesting we take that off the syllabus, are you?"

"Potions is taught by a qualified professional!" Lucius was heard snarling. "Potions that are likely to be hazardous generally aren't taught to students who aren't old enough to make them properly! What qualifications does that oaf of a half-giant have? He doesn't even have an OWL to his name!"

Now it was Dumbledore's turn to intervene. "Lucius, Hagrid may not have qualifications, but he has plenty of practical experience in dealing with magical creatures, more so than many better qualified wizards and witches. I have every confidence in him to teach the subject well."

"That's if any of his students survive the first year!" Lucius sneered. "Headmaster, my son had a severe allergic reaction to his injury. He could have died. Now, maybe you are right and this Hagrid is an exemplary teacher. But if he is, why did he not realise that one of his beasts was out of control and likely to attack a child? Or if the beast is normal, why did he not issue appropriate safety warnings?"

"Hagrid assures me he did, Lucius," said Albus firmly. "And some of the pupils present stated that your son was heard insulting the animal to its face despite being warned not to do so."

Hearing this, Draco squirmed uncomfortably. He was to feel even worse after hearing Lucius's next words.

"My son would not be such a fool!" he hissed.

It was Severus who spoke next. "Nevertheless, some quite bright children have their inattentive moments. I would estimate that well over ninety nine per cent of accidents in my lessons are caused by children either making silly mistakes, not reading recipes properly or by not following my instructions. Young Mr. Malfoy is not unique in that respect."

This did not improve Lucius's mood one bit. Hearing his beloved heir referred to as being exactly the same as all the other less exalted children was not what he wanted to hear.

"Well then, if this is a fault found in many children, maybe this Hagrid would be better off keeping beasts like that for an age group more likely to listen, or better yet, not having them around at all. Has the man no experience of children?"

"He's been working at Hogwarts most of his life," said Dumbledore.

"But not as a teacher," snapped Lucius. "And yet you have him exposing a group of young children to dangerous animals without so much as having a senior member of staff on hand to guide him? Headmaster, allow me to ask exactly what sort of school you are running here?"

"One run to the satisfaction of myself, my staff, my student body and the board of governors," came Dumbledore's reply. "If you have a problem with that, why not take it up with the governors yourself?"

"Bad move, Albus," Narcissa murmured under her breath. Lucius had been expelled from the board of governors last year and suffered public humiliation over it to boot. Seeing Molly Weasley being elected as his replacement had only served to add insult to injury. Needless to say, the topic of Hogwarts governors was not one mentioned in the Malfoy household unless you had a particular desire to have your eardrum perforated by Lucius Malfoy shouting in your ear at high volume. Draco slid slowly under the covers, not wanting to hear the reaction.

"Oh, this is too serious for the governors!" Lucius raged. "I'm going straight to the Ministry! You haven't heard the last of this, Dumbledore!" With that, he swept open the curtains and strode over to his wife. "Come on, Narcissa, we're leaving-" He noticed that Draco had woken up. Hesitating, he was torn between striding out in a typically stylish exit with his wife in tow, or staying to actually talk to the son he'd been so angry on behalf of. The look in Narcissa's eyes decided him. Snarling, he turned and drew the curtains in a dramatic flourish, before taking a seat on Draco's other side. The anger in his eyes dimmed a little as he took his son's good hand in his own.

"Well, Draco, and how are you feeling?" he asked gruffly.

"Better," said Draco. "Father, I think I'll be alright, you know. It was just a scratch. It was my own fault, really, I think I provoked it." The prospect of Ministry hearings was the last thing he wanted. He was beginning to wonder why on earth this plan of his had seemed like a good idea.

"You had an allergic reaction, Draco. You could have been killed." Lucius's eyes bored into his and Draco realised that his father was actually shaking.

"Father..." said Draco softly, trying to reassure him. No, this really had not been one of his brighter ideas. He hadn't even thought about how his parents would have reacted. At least Narcissa had known that he'd been trying to get off the Quidditch team somehow. For Lucius, the news must have come as a terrible shock. He looked away, unable to bear the concern in his father's eyes.

"Draco, I can't undo what was done," said Lucius, his voice shaking. "But I will do everything in my power to make sure that this doesn't happen to any other child."

"Father, don't," Draco whispered, wretched. "Don't go to all this trouble. I'm fine, really."

"Lucius, don't you think you might be overreacting?" Narcissa suggested gently.

"No, Narcissa, I don't!" Lucius snapped. "Allergies can kill sometimes, and Draco is very lucky that the wound itself wasn't fatal. No parent

should have to go through losing a child. Would you of all people wish that on anyone?"

"No, Lucius," said Narcissa, subdued. Draco didn't need to ask why the sudden and uncharacteristic submission on his mother's part. It was another taboo topic in the Malfoy household, but Draco hadn't been an only child. He'd had a twin sister, Dracaena, but she'd died young of unspecified causes, and not even Severus's skills had been able to save her. Apparently he'd nearly died himself after contracting a rather nasty illness. Severus and his mother had been able to rescue him, although it had stunted his physical development. He'd been small for his age ever since. However, they'd not been able to save his sister, and she'd died that night. Her name was never mentioned, and there were no outward signs in the house that she'd ever even existed. But Narcissa had a box in her bedroom containing photos, clothes, a birth certificate and a lock of hair, and one day, she'd taken Draco on her knee and told him about the sister he couldn't even remember. Draco had thought afterwards that it explained a lot about his parents and the way they acted around him from time to time. He remembered it now and felt even more guilty. If anything had happened to him... He didn't want to even think about how his parents would have taken the news. Not well, that was certain.

"Father, I'm going to be fine," said Draco, desperately trying to take that frightened look out of his father's eyes. "Please, don't worry about me!"

"Of course I worry about you, Draco, you're my son!" Lucius snapped, anger mixing with love mixing with irritation at having been seen actually showing it. He turned to Narcissa. "Come on, we'd best get home. Seeing as Draco is in no immediate danger of dying any time soon."

Narcissa smiled faintly as she got up to leave. "Take care, won't you Draco?" she said tenderly to him.

"Yes, Mother," said Draco, forcing a smile. "Bye, Father."

"Goodbye, Draco," said Lucius shortly, before opening the curtains, and following his wife out.

Draco was not long left to his own devices. His next visitors were the headmaster and his house head, Professor Snape. Dumbledore greeted him first.

"Hello there, Mr. Malfoy," he said genially, taking the seat Narcissa had just vacated. "And how are you feeling after today's incident?"

"Wiser, with any luck," Snape muttered, preferring to stand at the end of the bed. He at least seemed no different than normal, glowering at Draco in a way that left no doubt as to who he thought to blame for the whole affair.

"Now, now, Severus," said Dumbledore. "Mr. Malfoy's had a very distressing experience. Let's not allocate blame just yet. Not before we've uncovered all the facts."

"Yes, let's have an inquiry first by all means," said Snape theatrically. "Then we can put it down to human stupidity."

"Severus..." said Dumbledore, giving Snape a warning look.

"More than ninety nine per cent, Albus," said Snape. However, he did back down after that. Dumbledore returned his attention to Draco.

"So, Mr. Malfoy, your father seems to think that Hagrid was negligent in letting you work with a dangerous beast like a Hippogriff."

"Does he?" asked Draco. Best to feign innocence until he could work out just what his headmaster was up to. A former Gryffindor he might be, but Albus Dumbledore was not born yesterday and Draco knew it.

"Yes, apparently he failed to provide adequate safeguards or warnings," Dumbledore continued. "Either that, or the Hippogriff you were working with is a rogue animal, and Hagrid was negligent in not spotting it."

Draco said nothing. While he wanted to leap to Buckbeak's defence, he was not so foolish as to play into the older wizard's hands. If Dumbledore wanted information out of him, he'd have to work for it.

"I wouldn't know, sir," said Draco levelly. "I don't really know much about Hippogriffs."

"Evidently," Snape was heard to mutter. Dumbledore chose to ignore him.

"No?" said Dumbledore gently. "Did Hagrid not tell you anything beforehand? Anything about how to approach them, what manner of beast they were? Any safety warnings, perhaps?" The emphasis changed subtly on the last phrase and Draco was not slow in picking up on it. So that was what this was about. Evidence gathering for the now inevitable inquiry.

"I don't really remember," said Draco, doing his best to play up the whole 'injured and recuperating' situation. "It's all so vague. All I remember is the pain and the blood." "Oh the agony," Snape muttered. As the grandson of a noted pair of actors on his father's side, he was well placed to notice when someone was less than sincere in their emotional responses. It was a trait that had served him well as a teacher.

Dumbledore sighed. It was obvious that no one was going to get anything out of the boy just yet.

"Come on, Severus," he said sadly. "Let's leave Mr. Malfoy to recover." He turned back to Draco as he got up to leave. "If you remember anything, anything at all, you will come and see either me or Professor Snape, won't you?"

"Yes sir," said Draco, hoping he didn't sound too guilty. Fortunately for him, Dumbledore either believed him or was choosing not to press the point. Indicating for Snape to follow him, he slipped through the curtains. Snape gave him one very

suspicious look that said very clearly that a private word at a later date was in the offing, before leaving in turn. However, it wasn't long before Dumbledore reappeared.

"Young Miss Lovegood's outside asking about you. Shall I send her in?" The twinkle in his eyes had a certain shine to it that, had Draco been more aware, he would have rightly been wary of. However, as it was, blood loss and shock had rendered him less alert than normal.

"Yeah, go on then," Draco yawned. It'd be nice to see Marlie again. He could tell her how long he'd be off the team for and get to see the look on her face when she realised she had her place back. Dumbledore smiled and disappeared, a knowing look on his face. Moments later, a small blonde figure appeared, and Draco glanced up to greet her, before recoiling, confused and not a little stunned. This wasn't Marlie.

True, she had blonde hair and blue eyes, and there was a definite resemblance to her features. But the girl's hair, blonde though it was, was straggly, unkempt and in definite need of a trim, a complete contrast to Marlie's immaculate locks, while the girl's eyes looked pale and washed out, and didn't seem to blink as much as normal people's eyes. In fact, they didn't seem to have closed since she'd entered. She was wearing rather dishevelled Hogwarts robes with Ravenclaw colours, which, although the right size, didn't seem to really hang on her body properly, along with a necklace and matching bracelet made of what looked like Coke ring-pulls. In all, there was a definite strangeness about her, even by magical standards. Had Rianne been there, she would have taken one look at the girl's aura and run.

Unfortunately for him, Draco had neither Sight nor the option of running. All he could do was stare at the girl, wondering who on earth she was. He was certain he'd never seen her before - those eyes had a way of lingering in your memory and not in a good way either.

"You're not Marlie," he said decisively. What on earth had Dumbledore been thinking of, lying to him like that? Words would be had later, of that he was certain.

The girl shook her head, breaking eye contact for the first time.

"No, Marlie's a Slytherin. And older. Marlie's fifteen and pretty, and when she walks down the corridor, all the boys look at her while pretending they're not. Happens all the time."

"Right..." Draco felt his head swimming. Was this actually happening, or was the blood loss making him hallucinate? At the moment, it was difficult to tell. "What did you say your name was again?"

"Luna," the girl giggled. "Luna Lovegood."

Lovegood? That explained Dumbledore's behaviour, including that damned twinkle, as well as neatly putting paid to any thought of complaint. Technically speaking, this was Miss Lovegood. Just not the one he'd been expecting. Frowning, he wondered just who she actually was. Marlie didn't have any sisters that he knew of, although he could see why she might have wanted to keep this one hidden.

"And you're related to Marlie Lovegood, right?"

Luna nodded eagerly. "That's right!" she beamed. Draco waited for further explanation. None was forthcoming.

"Right. Er... do you mind me asking how?"

"She's my cousin." Still the grin.

"Another one?" Draco asked weakly. How many cousins did Marlie have? Including himself, there were three, plus one stepcousin, and now this girl as well? He racked his brains trying to work out how Luna fitted into the Lovegood family tree. Leonard had only ever mentioned one sibling, his ultra-sceptic older sister Annabel who apparently out Scullyed Dana Scully in the disbelief stakes and was mother to Rachel and Paul Clearwater, and stepmother to Penelope Clearwater, a distant cousin of Luella's. It was admittedly rather a complex family tree, but still there didn't seem to be a place for Luna in it. Annabel Lovegood just was not the type to call any child of hers a name as unusual as that.

"So, er, who are your parents then? Marlie hasn't really told me a lot about you, you see," he said apologetically.

"Marlie doesn't really pay much attention to me," said Luna sadly, her eyes downcast. "But that's OK. Not many people do. I'm used to it. Marlie's got important stuff to do like play Quidditch and build things and talk to boys while fluttering her eyelashes."

"Well, yes, I suppose," Draco managed to reply lamely. There wasn't a lot you could really say to that. Luna, ignoring his reaction, continued.

"Cousin Marlie's really clever. I wish I was more like her," Luna said, a dreamy expression in her eyes. "Everyone likes Marlie." Her face fell again. "But I can't think the way she does. I tried building a Game Boy once, but it was just wires and circuits and crystals and bits of string and bottle tops. It didn't work like hers do."

Draco was fairly certain that string and bottle tops were not standard Game Boy parts, and told Luna this.

"Oh, that's alright," said Luna. "They are in hers."

Draco decided there and then that he was never using one of Marlie's games consoles again.

"Dad tells me not to worry about it, that she's Marlie and I'm Luna and we're different and he loves me anyway. Dad's cool like that," Luna smiled. Draco really wished she'd pick one mood and stick to it, the constant changing was getting to him like nothing else.

"So who is your father anyway?" he asked, determined to get to the bottom of her family tree. Like most Slytherins, he found it difficult to relate to someone until he'd found out exactly who their relatives were and where they stood socially in relation to

him. He'd often thought Muggle-borns would have it a lot easier if they'd dress up their family tree and give their relatives impressive titles. They'd still be socially inferior of course, but it would at least inspire respect.

"Lawrence Lovegood," Luna answered. "He edits The Quibbler."

Finally it all fell into place. This explained everything. The Quibbler was notorious for its stories which verged from the unlikely to the weird to the downright bizarre, even by magical standards. Marlie was regularly to be heard mocking it and those who read it. Virtually no Slytherins who'd been there more than a few weeks dared to read it openly after hearing one of Marlie's tirades. However, Draco had often thought that Marlie's antipathy towards it was a little extreme, even for a noted sceptic like Marlie. Besides, the very content of these rants indicated that Marlie must actually read the magazine from time to time. Now it was all explained. Marlie was related to the editor, deeply embarrassed about the fact, couldn't get out of reading it herself now and then because he was family, but was determined to make sure no one in

her house read the magazine, just in case they noticed the editor's name. He couldn't help grinning to himself.

"Why are you smiling?" Luna asked, curious. "Do you read The Quibbler?"

Draco shook himself and returned his attention to Luna. "Me? Oh, no, not really." He noticed her crestfallen features and hastily tried to reassure her. "But Marlie talks about it all the time."

Luna lit up on hearing this. "Really?" she breathed.

"Oh yes," Draco nodded, feeling only mildly guilty about doing this to his cousin. After all, didn't she owe him her newly regained Quidditch place? "There's not a member of our house who hasn't been treated to her opinions of the magazine." That at least was true.

"Ohhh!" Luna was sitting next to him, grinning all over, pale eyes lit up inside. "She likes it? Really?"

"Well, er, I..." Fortunately for Draco, Luna was too excited to pay any attention to his less than equivocal response.

"That's so cool!" she squealed. "Does this mean she'll talk to me in the corridors now? Normally she just mutters something to her friends and runs."

"Oh, I can guarantee she'll talk to you," Draco assured her, the seeds of an evil plan forming in his mind. He looked at Luna, really looked at her this time, summing her up the way only a Slytherin could. She's not so bad, really. Bit strange, but all she really wants is someone to talk to. And some attention from her glamorous cousin. He began to wonder why she was actually here. After all, it wasn't like he'd ever even seen her before. He hadn't even known there was a Luna Lovegood in school. Marlie must have done a good job of keeping her hidden.

"So, er, why are you visiting me?" he asked. "Is there something you wanted me to do for you?"

Luna shook her head. "Oh no. I just wanted to talk to you alone. Normally you're with your friends, or in your common room, or in class. This is the only chance I've really had."

"Right, and why did you want to talk to me alone?" Draco asked, mildly disturbed. "I should warn you that I don't do press interviews. Father would never allow it."

"Well, you're Marlie's cousin too," said Luna, as if that explained everything.

"And?" Draco pressed.

"So," Luna explained with the air of one explaining the obvious to a small child, "if I'm Marlie's cousin and you're Marlie's cousin, doesn't that make us family?"

"It doesn't quite work like that, Luna," Draco said, hoping he wasn't going to regret not telling her to go away as soon as she'd first appeared.

"Why not?" Luna asked, that unblinking gaze fixed unwaveringly on him.

Draco decided that reason and an explanation involving Muggle genetics and the exact definition of 'blood kin' wasn't going to work here. Instead, he decided to change the subject.

"But don't you already have relatives in Ravenclaw?" he asked. "I mean, aren't the Clearwaters related to you?"

"Oh yes, and we get on really well," Luna nodded. "I mean, Dad and Auntie Annabel don't talk anymore, because she doesn't believe in magic and thinks he's making it all up, but Penny and the twins still look after me. Of course Penny's busy with her prefect duties and her schoolwork, and last year she spent most of the time in the hospital wing being Petrified, but she looks out for me when she can. And the

twins are always playing around with me. We've got this cool game we play, where they grab my schoolbag and we play Piggy in the Middle with it. Of course, I always seem to be the Piggy but I'm sure they'll want a go at some point. And we play practical jokes on each other too, although it's mostly them playing practical jokes on me, as I'm not clever enough to think of any myself. That's why I'd like to be able to think like Marlie does, she's really good at practical jokes. Although I must be clever at schoolwork, because they're always borrowing my essays. They just never seem to remember to return them though."

Draco listened to all this, the smile vanishing from his face. Despite himself, he felt his heart go out to her. Someone, somewhere was going to pay for this.

"Do you mean to tell me," he said coldly, "that they keep your schoolbag away from you when you need it, steal your work so you get in trouble with teachers and generally torment you?"

"Well, it does get to me a bit sometimes," Luna admitted, before brightening up. "But I don't mind, really! I mean, no one else really talks to me much, so it's nice that my cousins take the time to talk to me."

"Nice of them," Draco echoed, not quite able to believe it. "Luna, how long has this been going on?"

"Since I started school," said Luna. "They mostly ignored me at first, but after Penny got Petrified, they decided I looked lonely."

"Bloody hell, Luna," Draco whispered. "And you never went to a teacher about all this?"

"Teacher?" Luna looked blank. "Why would I do that? They're just looking out for me."

"Looking out for you?" Draco raised an eyebrow. "If any of my family looked out for me like that, my mum'd use their guts for garters and their ribcage as a hat." He paused, remembering just what his mother was known to do when angry. "Possibly literally. And you never said anything to Marlie or Michael either?"

Luna shook her head. "Oh no. Marlie usually runs away whenever she sees me. And Michael's busy with prefect stuff. At least, he always seems to have something urgent to do whenever I try and talk to him. Which is why I wanted to talk to you. After all, if you're kind of family, it'd be nice to have someone other than Rachel and Paul to talk to, and to say hello to me in the corridor and things." She went quiet and blushed. "That is, if it's alright with you." She looked away shyly. Draco took her hand in his.

"Luna, it's fine," he said, ignoring the voice of his wiser self which was presently demanding to know if he was insane and did he have any idea what this would do to his reputation?

"Listen, I'll have a word with Marlie, yeah? Get her to stop running away, and to talk to you for once. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Luna nodded eagerly. "Would you?"

"Of course," Draco nodded. "And Luna, next time your cousins want to play a game with you, ask if you can invite me along. I'd like to join one of these family gatherings. They sound fun." The way his lips curled as he said the word 'fun' indicated that he meant it in the strictly Slytherin sense.

"Will do!" Luna grinned. "That would be cool!"

For a moment, nothing was said. Luna just sat there grinning, while Draco waited patiently for the conversation to start again. He soon realised that this wasn't going to happen unless he said something.

"So, er, was there something else you wanted to ask me?"

"Oh!" Luna seemed to remember something else. "I wanted to know if you really had had your arm ripped off by a Hippogriff."

Draco yelped at the mere idea. "No," he said, trying not to imagine that he'd been that close to it. "Arm still firmly attached, look." He waved the bandaged arm around. "Just a little scratch. Nothing serious."

Luna's face fell. "Oh. Never mind. Because that would have been cool, having a one-armed cousin. You could have had one of this magically enhanced replacement limbs, with superhuman strength and gadgets and everything."

"I'm quite happy with my own arm, thank you, Luna," said Draco firmly, although the idea of an arm with special powers was starting to appeal.

Luna, he noticed, had abandoned the topic of his arm and was now carefully examining the bed.

"Er... Luna? What are you doing?"

"Have you checked the bed yet?" Luna asked.

"Checked the bed?" Draco felt the little hairs on his spine start to prickle. Mad as she seemed, did Luna know something he didn't?

"Checked the bed for what?"

Luna tutted. "You haven't, have you. Honestly, Draco. Good thing I brought this." The girl produced something that bore a striking resemblance to a Beater bat, and passed it to Draco. "Here. I didn't think you'd have been able to get yours, so I thought I'd lend you mine."

Draco took it and eyed it carefully. "Er, Luna, I think you may have got your wires crossed. I don't need one of these, I play Seeker."

Luna fell about giggling. "No, silly!" she finally managed to get out when she'd recovered herself. "It's not for Quidditch! It's a Narglestick!"

"Oh, I see! Well that makes it all so much clearer, doesn't it?" Draco folded his arms as best he could with one of them wrapped in bandages and still itching. "Luna, what is a Narglestick for exactly?"

"Hitting Nargles," Luna promptly replied.

"And they are?" Draco asked, beginning to have an inkling of how Luna's mind worked by now. You asked her a question and she would answer it... but only give the exact information you'd asked for. Apparently it didn't occur to Luna that someone might want additional information on top of what they'd actually asked for. You literally had to spell out what you wanted to know. And the thing was, Draco could just tell that even if he tried to explain the concept of implied questions to her, she'd only look confused and ask why someone would want to know something and not ask it. Still, at least he never had to worry about Luna being part of a hidden plot. Chances were she'd reveal the entire thing to the first person who asked her. In a way, it was

rather refreshing, if hard work at times. First thing on his mind though, was finding out what Nargles were. He was almost certain that they weren't in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*.

"They're little worms that live inside your pillow, and bury into your skull at night," said Luna, entirely seriously. Her eyes were wide and solemn, and they were staring unblinkingly at Draco. "Didn't your mum and dad ever tell you about them?"

"No, I can't say they ever did." Draco noticed the horrified look on Luna's face and hastily decided to reassure her. "But I think they always got the house elves to de-Nargle the bed before I got in."

Luna relaxed. "That's alright then. Because if a Nargle gets you, it chews through your skull until it reaches your brain, then it anchors itself to your brain cells while it lays its eggs, before escaping out of your ear. Then, a few weeks later, the eggs hatch into little Nargles, who eat your brain while they're growing, and when they're big enough, they burst out of your skull while you're in bed and burrow into the pillow waiting for their next victim. That's why they call them Nargles, you know. Because of the noises people make while they're being attacked." She nodded solemnly.

Draco handled the Narglestick, unsure whether to take her seriously or not. On the one hand, Luna seemed to mean what she said. On the other hand, Luna Lovegood was several talismans short of a grimoire.

"I see. Luna, who told you about Nargles? It wasn't your cousins, was it?"

Luna shook her head. "Oh no. Dad told me. He was researching them for a Quibbler article."

Draco could only sigh. He idly wondered whether Luna was odd to begin with, or whether her parents had raised her that way. He also decided that he had to get a look at this magazine. He'd never actually read a copy before - Lucius didn't want to be associated with such a far out publication, and Narcissa's opinion of it rivalled Marlie's in venom. Still, he was sure there were a few Slytherins who had hidden copies lying around. There were always those who were curious about forbidden things.

"So I take it that the Narglestick's for getting rid of them, then? Let me guess, you beat your pillow with one and that knocks them out?"

Luna nodded eagerly. "That's right! You HAVE heard of them!"

"They're beginning to sound vaguely familiar," Draco conceded, having come to the decision that it would make both their lives easier if he humoured her. "But listen, Luna, I can't take your Narglestick. Suppose you went to bed without it and a Nargle got you? I couldn't live with myself."

Luna brushed away his concerns. "Oh don't worry, I often have to do without. Rachel's always borrowing mine, and she never brings it back either. I don't mind though. She's a bit absent-minded, keeps leaving it in the strangest places. Once, she

and Paul managed to get it wedged in the eaves of the Great Hall after playing catch with it, and I couldn't work out how to get it down at all. In the end, Professor Dumbledore summoned it back for me. He's very nice. Do you know, it was his idea for me to talk to you. Said it wasn't fair for me to only play with the twins and ignore the rest of the family."

Somehow, Draco was not surprised that the headmaster was involved. That man is a better manipulator than some Slytherins. Still, he wasn't angry. Despite himself, he was starting to like the girl. Although his feelings for the rest of the family were going rapidly down hill. Still, it wasn't as if last year hadn't brought enough problems, without having to help out Luna too. Most of the Lovegoods and Clearwaters were not past redemption. Draco however was still determined to make sure that Luna did not have to put up with her cousins' abuse any more.

"Well, I'm very glad you did, Luna. It's been a fascinating conversation and I've learnt a lot. And thank you for the Narglestick too, I'm sure it'll come in very useful."

To his surprise, Luna actually blushed. "It's nothing," she whispered.

"Thank you anyway," Draco smiled. He glanced at his watch. "Now, isn't it time you went and had dinner? There can't be much of the evening meal left now."

Luna dismissed his worries as she got up to leave. "Oh, don't worry. I don't eat much anyway. Rachel and Paul usually finish mine. In fact, that happens so often, that now they start eating my food before I've even finished!" She grinned again, apparently unaware that this was not appropriate family behaviour. "Bye, Draco!" she called, before disappearing.

"Bye, Looney Tune," Draco sighed, lying down again. He found himself suddenly exhausted. Sleep seemed like a very good idea. Curling up, he closed his eyes. Nargles, for gods' sake. What planet is that girl on? However, as sleep was about to claim him, another thought occurred to him. Suppose, just suppose, that Luna was actually right? It was an outside possibility, true, but you never could tell...

Sitting bolt upright, he grabbed the Narglestick with his good arm, and battered the pillow as hard as he could without attracting Madam Pomfrey's attention, until he was sure that there were no Nargles lurking. Then, finally, he laid his head on the pillow and slept.

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It was several days before Madam Pomfrey declared Draco fit to leave. His friends visited him on occasion, and his mother wrote to him, enquiring after his health and asking if he'd spoken to Marlie yet, but apart from that, he was left to his own devices. Luna had not returned since that first evening, and Draco caught himself wondering if she was alright. He'd grown rather attached to the young Ravenclaw.

So it was that when he was finally allowed out, Marlie was the first person he sought out as soon as he was able. Of course, he first had to endure Flint's wrath. The

Quidditch captain had already heard from Snape that Draco's ability to play was in doubt, and hearing it confirmed did not help his mood one bit.

"Bloody hell, Malfoy!" Flint raged. "What were you thinking of?? Everyone knows not to piss off Hippogriffs! You are an absolute prat sometimes! Now what am I supposed to do! We play Gryffindor in a few weeks! How are we meant to beat them without a Seeker?"

"Call the match off then!" Draco snapped. His arm was being particularly irritating and he was silently cursing all the female members of his family for landing him in this situation to begin with. "Get another Seeker! There must be others who want a go. We've got reserves, haven't we? Did they not win the reserve trophy last year?"

"It's true, Flint," Mike Lovegood confirmed, from the purple beanbag where he was listening in. "Get Marls back in the team, she's really good. And the only one we have who's capable of beating Potter."

"If she doesn't hand him the Snitch like last time," Flint muttered. Nevertheless, he appeared to be giving thought to the idea. At length, he gave in. "OK, OK. She can come back for one game, or until Malfoy's better at any rate. Oi! Lovegood!" he yelled across the common room. Marlie glanced up from her textbook, clearly rattled.

"What?" she snapped. "I'm trying to concentrate on my work!"

"You? Working? On schoolwork? That'll be the day," Flint scoffed. "Listen, kid, your tosswit cousin here has gone and got himself injured and can't play. We play Gryffindor in a few weeks, and we need a Seeker who can beat Potter. Want the job?"

"Want the..." Marlie stared at him, unable to believe her ears. "Do I want the Seeker job? First team Seeker?" She immediately squealed with delight and started dancing around. "Yes! Yes! Yes! I do! Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you, THANK YOU!" She flung her arms around Marcus Flint and kissed him on the cheek. Flint froze, looking absolutely disgusted.

"Don't thank me, thank your knobhead cousin," he snarled. "And don't EVER touch me like that again!" Grimacing, he turned away. "Training sessions are every Wednesday at four pm sharp. Don't be late!" He strode off, still looking as if he was going to be ill, Mike Lovegood starting to tease him after winking at his sister.

Marlie turned to Draco. "Malfoy, do you reckon Flint's actually straight?" she asked, frowning. "Most men don't mind me doing that."

"I don't think he's actually into sex full stop," Draco mused. "I think he's sublimated it all into Quidditch."

Marlie just shook her head. "Weird," she commented. She regarded her cousin, paying particular attention to his arm. "So what happened then? Popular rumour has it that you were mooning a Hippogriff and won't be able to sit down for a week."

"Lies," said Draco, making a mental note to track down that particular rumour source and inflict the injuries they'd attributed to him. "Just a little scratch on my arm which flared up because of a Hippogriff allergy."

"Hippogriff allergy?" Marlie flared. "You don't get allergic to Hippogriffs!"

"Well, I am," Draco countered. "So there."

Marlie muttered something under her breath about inbreeding and recessive genes, before changing the subject.

"Well, your oversensitivity has its good points, I suppose. As you may have heard, I've landed your job." She couldn't help smirking at this. The wounds of the previous year had not entirely healed, and she still hadn't entirely forgiven her cousin. She was surprised then to see him return her smile.

"So I heard," he said calmly. "Congratulations. Give Potter hell, won't you? I'd hate to think I'd gone through all this for nothing."

"I'll do my best-" Marlie's eyes widened as she realised what he'd said. "You did that deliberately?"

Draco just smiled and nodded once. Marlie continued to stare at him, before grabbing him by the arm and dragging him out of the door, before steering him into a nearby cell.

"Why?" she demanded, once they had privacy.

Now that Draco was actually face to face with his cousin, he began to wonder if this had been a good idea, telling her. Maybe he'd have been better off keeping quiet. However, he did need her help in return, and this was as good a way as any of ensuring it.

"Felt bad?" he offered as a reason.

"You've got a conscience now?" Marlie exclaimed. "Since when?"

Draco shrugged. "Can if I want," he muttered.

"Keep quiet about it then," Marlie warned him. "People might take advantage." Here, her expression widened into a grin. "People like me, for instance."

"Aw, you wouldn't," Draco purred. He might have gained a rudimentary conscience, but he was still recognisably himself for all that. "Would you, cous?" He made a point at peeping at her through his eyelashes.

"For god's sake, Malfoy," said Marlie irritably. The expression on her face bore a marked resemblance to that on Flint's after she'd kissed him.

"What?" Draco pouted. "Do I not look cute and appealing?"

"You look vomit-inducing," Marlie snapped. "Is this your way of exacting payback, by making me too nauseated to fly?"

"Oh no," said Draco, grinning. "I've got another plan for that. Marls, why did you never tell me about that cousin of yours?"

Marlie frowned, confused. "Which cousin? You know about the Clearwaters... oh god." Her eyes shot open. "Not her!"

"That's right," Draco confirmed, with a barracuda smile. "Lovely Luna. She visited me in the hospital wing, you know. Sweet kid. Mad as a fish, of course, but very nice."

"How lovely for you," said Marlie with gritted teeth, all the while wondering if it would be a good idea to perform a quick Memory Charm. How many other people had he mentioned Luna to, and more importantly, did the castle wards pick this sort of thing up?

"She mentioned you a lot, you know," said Draco. "Apparently you're her favourite cousin."

"Am I?" asked Marlie, her heart sinking.

"Oh yes," Draco nodded. "She wishes she was as pretty as you."

"Yes, well, being sane does generally make one better looking," Marlie snapped. "Listen, Malfoy, I don't know what she's said to you, but the girl is nuts. Absolutely loopy. Uncle Lawrence always was strange, driving Dad and Auntie Annabel crazy with stories of sprites and goblins, and weird creatures he'd seen."

"Which you know to exist yourself, and as a Muggle-born wizard, he'd have been the only one in his family to be able to see!" Draco interrupted.

"He edits the Quibbler!" Marlie cried. "Draco, the man is nuts even by our standards!"

"I wouldn't know," Draco snapped back. "Mum and Father won't have the magazine in the house, and thanks to you, no one at school's willing to admit to having it either!"

"Trust me, it's weird. And as if his own innate insanity wasn't enough, he goes and marries somebody else who's even madder than he is, and she ends up killing herself in a freak magical accident. Is it any wonder that their child is not on this planet?" Marlie fumed.

"That's no need to be angry at her, is it?" said Draco softly. Luna's mother was dead? That also explained a lot. His own mother was also notorious for her magical 'experiments'. He didn't know what he'd have done if one of them had killed her. Probably turned into a vicious and violent psychopath, he guessed. Luna clearly wasn't the violent type, but it had obviously had an effect.

Marlie muttered something, arms crossed protectively in front of her.

"Not the point," Draco thought he heard her say.

"Ashamed of her, are you?" he sneered.

"Maybe," Marlie murmured.

"Why?" Draco countered. "Did Daddy dearest spend your childhood telling you to believe only in what you could see, and that anyone who thought otherwise should be avoided? Like your crazy cousin Luna?"

Marlie didn't answer. It was all the confirmation Draco needed.

"Thought as much," he nodded. "You Lovegoods, you never think to criticise your parents' views at all, do you? Nice to know I'm one up in that respect at least. Fortunately for you, Leonard's basically a nice bloke who abhors violence in any form. Unfortunately for Luna, your aunt Annabel's not."

Marlie's eyes narrowed. This was the dangerous bit. Marlie was rather fond of her aunt.

"What are you talking about, Malfoy?" she demanded.

"Your aunt the fundamentalist," Draco said, determined not to be intimidated. "Who won't believe in anything that can't be measured, and what is worse, has the arrogance to refuse to believe she might be wrong. Your aunt who openly sneers at anything remotely 'mystical', and by example if not actual words, encourages her children to do likewise. Who teaches them that it is OK to harass and look down on those who think differently. And no one thinks more differently than Luna."

Marlie was not slow in guessing his meaning, although on this occasion, she decided it would be better for her to dawdle.

"What about Luna? Rach and Pauly have said nothing to me about her."

"They wouldn't," said Draco. "They'd rather no one senior to them knew about what's going on."

"What's going on?" asked Marlie, exasperated. "Look, stop beating around the bush, Draco. Just tell me!"

"They're picking on her," said Draco. "Because she's different, and strange, and at heart, they're ashamed that she's their kin. Because every word their beloved mother has for Luna and her father is one that implies they're less than human. And because Luna has no friends, no one to stick up for her. All she has is her family, and most of them seem to be turning a blind eye to what the others are doing. Marlie, they're making her miserable. And the thing is, Luna's so lonely and desperate for attention, she doesn't even know why she's miserable. She thinks it's normal and that they're just

being friendly." He proceeded to describe the conversation he'd had with Luna earlier. Marlie listened in stunned silence.

"Why are you telling me this?" she asked when he finished. "What am I meant to do? Shouldn't you be telling Snape or Flitwick about this?"

"And what are they going to do?" Draco snapped. "Snape is not going to put himself out for some little Ravenclaw, and can you really imagine Flitwick being authoritarian? Besides, Luna'll probably just say they're being friendly, and the teachers'll believe her. Dumbledore suspects, you know, but without a complaint from Luna herself, he can't do anything. It was him who set up the meeting between us, encouraged Luna to come to me. What a teacher can't do, the Crown Prince of Slytherin might. And he's right. I will see something done about this. But seeing as she's your cousin, I thought I'd try you first. It's family politics so let's start with the family, eh?"

"Draco..." Marlie sighed. "I'm not about to tell Auntie Annabel that she's got to be nice to her little brother! Any more than you're about to tell your father to stop hating Muggleborns."

"I never said you had to," said Draco. "But you have other options, don't you? And you're going to use them."

"And if I don't?" asked Marlie, determined not to have to get involved if she didn't have to.

"Then I'll use mine. And my options include publicly adopting Luna, incidentally revealing to everybody that your uncle edits the Quibbler, the publication you've spent your entire Hogwarts career rubbishing, and that the craziest kid in Ravenclaw happens to be related to you.

Now, Marls. Thanks to my rediscovery of my principles, and my rebirth as a caring and selfless individual, you have your Quidditch place back. You owe me. See this as calling in the favour."

"Selfless, eh?" Marlie sighed. "Gods, I think I preferred you when you were an arsehole."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Cous, I still can be. Just that right now, I'm enjoying the moral high ground too much to stop." His expression darkened. "So. Are you going to deal with the Luna Problem, or am I?"

"No, I'll sort it," Marlie muttered. It didn't really look like she had a choice. Either way, this was going to blow up in her face, but if she could maintain some control over it, she would.

"Good." Draco patted her arm with a smile. "I'll let you get on with it, shall I? I'll meet up with Luna again in a week or so, find out how she's doing. In the mean time, I'll leave it in your capable hands. See you later, cous!" He left for the common room, with a wink, leaving Marlie wondering what on earth she'd agreed to.

Chapter Ten Taoism, Intrigue and a Great Big Axe

Marlie was not slow in moving into action. She knew that this was no idle threat of Draco's - he meant it. After all, he had no prior knowledge of Luna - she'd been sitting on the table next to his in the library only the other day, they'd both been alone and yet Draco hadn't even looked up from his books. No, he must only have learnt of Luna's identity while hospitalised. Damn him! Marlie thought. Why now did he have to start acting selflessly? It rather took the glow off her

reinstatement. Still, Marlie was not a Slytherin for nothing, and she was soon swinging into action.

"Lu." The Second Heir glanced up and was surprised to see Marlie crouching next to her, a panicked look on her face. Hadn't she just been given her Quidditch place back? Shouldn't she be happy? Something was evidently up.

"What's wrong?" Luella asked.

"Penny Clearwater's a kind of cousin of yours, isn't she?"

"That's right," said Luella guardedly. Their respective mothers had been cousins, and Penelope was Luella's only living mage close blood relative (apart from a great aunt, who was also Penelope's grandmother, but neither girl was close to her). As a result, the two girls were rather close, and Luella did not particularly want her cousin involved with Marlie's latest scheme. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I need her help and she's a damn sight more likely to listen to you than me."

"Why do you need her help?" Luella asked wearily. "What have you done now?"

Marlie shook her head. "Not me. My cousins."

"Which ones, you have about five of them."

"Er... all of them?" With a shock, Marlie realised that it was literally true. She began to wonder if her large extended family was more trouble than it was worth. Luella had just raised an eyebrow.

"Come on, let's go to the dorm. You'd better tell me all about it."

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Before long, Luella too was wondering if extended families were more trouble than they were worth, although the thought of Marlie being related to the editor of the strangest publication the wizarding world had to offer was too ironic for words. With Marlie in tow, she approached the hidden door that led to the Prefects' Common Room.

"Wait here," she told Marlie. "You don't need to come in, and I don't want you eavesdropping on the password either." She approached a picture of a group of dragons playing dice in a Lorien-esque clearing

and whispered the password. The portrait swung open and she stepped in.

Marlie waited outside, growing increasingly agitated. She had no way of knowing what was going on in there, and no way of knowing how Penelope would react. Still, she knew her stepcousin well enough to know that Penelope would not stand idly by and see her own siblings torment a family member.

Sure enough, ten minutes later, the portrait slammed open and a furious Penelope Clearwater stormed out. Barely noticing Marlie, she swept past and walked briskly in the direction of the library. A grinning Luella, walking at a far more leisurely pace, followed her out.

"What happened?" Marlie asked.

"She listened in silence with this very tight-lipped look on her face," Luella explained with a smile. "When I'd finished, all she said was 'I see'. Then she got up, excused herself and left. I think your Clearwater cousins are about to get the screaming match of their lives."

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Much good did it do them. The twins had by now developed ignoring their sister into an art form, and Penelope had never really mastered anger. By the time she found them, the rage that had been developing since she'd left the common room had dwindled into righteous indignation.

"Come on, Pen, it's only Luna," laughed Rachel. "Just our dimwit cousin."

"Yeah, who cares about her?" said Paul. "It's not like she has any friends, after all."

"Isn't that all the more reason for her family to look after her?" Penelope stared at them, amazed that they'd all grown up in the same house yet turned out so differently. The twins just shrugged back. Suddenly infuriated, she grabbed them both by the arms, ignoring their complaints.

"Luna!" she yelled across the Ravenclaw common room. From the quiet corner next to the bust of Erasmus that she'd made her own over the last year, Luna came scampering across the common room.

"Penny!" she giggled. "You're back!" Luna had hardly seen Penelope since she'd been revived last year.

"Yes I am," said Penelope darkly. "And not a minute too soon, I see. Come on. We're all going to Professor Flitwick's office." And with the twins protesting their innocence, and Luna bouncing along behind, delighted to be invited on a family outing, she marched them all off to Professor Flitwick's office.

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Of course, things did not go according to plan. Rachel and Paul vigorously denied any wrongdoing, while Luna, on being questioned, chatted at great length about how she and her cousins were always playing together and how they always looked out for her.

Penelope could only roll her eyes in dismay. Finally, she suggested to Flitwick that perhaps the twins should wait outside. He agreed, and,

glancing nervously at one another, Rachel and Paul slipped into the corridor.

Penelope turned to Luna.

"Now, Luna," she said gently. "Tell Professor Flitwick how the twins really treat you."

Luna, puzzled, repeated what she'd said earlier. Penelope could only groan in disbelief.

"No, Luna, they're not here. You don't have to hide anything. If there's anything you wanted to say earlier but didn't want to in front of them, here's your chance."

Luna blinked. The concept of hiding things was a new one for her. So rare were opportunities in the spotlight, the idea of keeping anything back had never before occurred to her. She'd found it always best to say everything she wanted to say while she had the chance - it might not happen again.

"Why would I not want to say something in front of them?" she asked, bewildered. Penelope ran her fingers through her hair, frustrated. Why, WHY, was this happening to her? She began to wonder if Luella's sources had been accurate. Was this some Slytherin practical joke at her expense? She dismissed the idea. Luella wouldn't do that to her deliberately, and nor was she the kind to be easily taken in. Besides, hadn't the twins virtually admitted what they'd been doing earlier? No, Penelope decided that the Slytherins' intuition was right. But how to prove it?

Flitwick was wringing his hands with a sigh.

"Well, Miss Clearwater, it's natural that you should be concerned about your cousin's welfare. But if she's happy with the way they treat her, there's no real reason for any of us to intervene. It's probably best for us all to simply keep an eye on the situation and see what happens." He turned to Luna with a paternal smile. "Now, Luna, dear, you do know that if you have any problems, you can come to me or Penelope, don't you?"

Luna nodded eagerly. Flitwick, apparently reassured, continued.

"Good, good. And you do know that I'm always here for my Ravenclaws whenever you need me? Even if only just to talk. And if you're not happy with the way your cousins are behaving, come and see me. Until then..." He looked up and turned back to a silently seething Penelope. "Yes, I think it's best if we don't interfere too closely in this one. These family differences are usually best left to sort themselves out."

What, like that Tyler/Malfoy feud Luella told me about? Penelope thought. She said nothing, however. Clearly she was going to get no help here.

"Of course, Professor," she said levelly, getting to her feet. "Come on, Luna," she said with a smile, extending a hand to the beaming youngster. "Let's not take up any more

of Professor Flitwick's time." Pleasantries were exchanged, and Penelope escorted Luna out of the door, and back along the corridor, deep in thought.

Evidently, this was not going to be as easy as she thought. Writing to her father was the next option on her mind, and that would certainly be worth doing. Would it be enough though? The twins didn't really listen to their father much at the best of times, and he'd never been comfortable disciplining his children. Besides, as long as Annabel continued to mock her brother Lawrence behind his back, the twins would continue to interpret that as permission to go for Luna. She didn't fancy her chances at sorting that out in a hurry. Not even if she persuaded Luella to talk Marlie into writing to her father and getting him

to act as go-between. Anyway, she wasn't sure she wanted to involve the Slytherins too deeply unless she had to. This was happening inside her house, in her own family, and it wouldn't reflect too well on her if she had to go running to the Slytherins at the first hurdle. Yet she couldn't do it on her own. What she needed, she decided, was a champion. Someone in Ravenclaw who people respected and looked up to. Someone older than the twins whose opinion they might just listen to. Someone who cared enough to take up Luna's cause and yet was impeccably neutral.

With a smile that Luella would have been proud of, she quickened her pace. She knew just the person.

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Penelope scanned the Ravenclaw common room as she entered it. She'd already made sure that Rachel had followed her brother into the boys' dorms, and Luna had been safely seen back into her own, with instructions to let no one but her dorm mates in. With the situation safely under control, she'd returned to the impeccably decorated Ravenclaw common room, looking like an extension of the library, which it once had been.

It did not take her long to find him. He was sitting in a quiet corner of the common room playing chess with, surprise surprise, his Singaporean Chinese girlfriend. The two were quite inseparable, and Penelope had no doubt that the girl in question would up and move lock, stock and barrel into the boys' dorm if she were allowed to. Nick Cleveland and Melinda Yang, fellow sixth years and Ravenclaw elders, respected by the older ones and almost worshipped by the younger ones, including, Penelope knew, her own siblings. They weren't prefects - Nick was considered bookish even by Ravenclaw standards and had no interest whatsoever in the routine aspects of prefecthood, while giving Melinda power like that was akin to handing shotguns out to seven year olds. Even Deanna Tyler walked in fear of Melinda Yang and her temper. However, Melinda had always been perfectly civil to Penelope. Melinda only really let rip on airheads and girly girls - the Cho Changs and Marlie Lovegoods of this world (although Marlie was actually quite intelligent really, when she put her mind to it). Whereas Nick was pleasant and charming to pretty much everyone, even those

he didn't really like. One of the reasons he was held in such awe - it was one thing for someone to start intimidating you, but when they were remaining civil and polite throughout, it made it that much worse.

"Nick. Melinda. I need your help." She pulled a chair over and settled into it without waiting to be invited. Melinda seemed to bristle a little at the abruptness, but a gesture from Nick quieted her.

"What seems to be the matter, Penny?" Nick asked. He knew her well enough to know that Penny would not be anything like that direct unless it was truly urgent.

"It's my little cousin, Luna Lovegood," said Penny. "You know, second year, short, blonde, quiet, jewellery made out of junk, bit strange but nice enough really?"

"I know her," said Nick with a grin. "Although I must say, calling her a 'bit strange' is like saying Hitler was a 'bit evil'."

"Nick!" Melinda gasped, horrified. Interesting. Penelope hadn't even thought Melinda knew Luna existed. Yet here she was apparently furious at Nick making fun of the girl. Very interesting indeed.

"Don't say that sort of thing about her!" Melinda snapped, eyes flaring in rage. Nick looked a bit taken aback. He'd seen her angry before - who hadn't? But not, Penelope suspected, angry at him.

"OK, OK, I'm sorry," he said, for once a little flustered. "Luna's not totally nuts. She's just a little... unusual." He turned his attention back to Penelope. "Yes, we both know of her. Why, what's the problem? She's alright, isn't she?"

Penelope shook her head with a heavy heart, the anger and despair starting to sink in. "No. No, she's not alright." She proceeded to tell them what Luella had told her and what she'd already known, about Luna's past and family background, about how Luna's father had been picked on by his ultra-sceptic older sister virtually all his childhood because of his constant claims to have seen things that Muggles all knew couldn't exist, and how even in adulthood, the animosity was still there. About how Annabel had passed her attitudes on to her two children and how, as soon as Luna had started school, they'd taken the feud to the next generation and started picking on Luna for much the same reasons. How they'd kept it quiet at first, before escalating it once Penelope had been petrified. How she'd only just found out about it through the Slytherins, and how an attempt to get Flitwick to help had gone nowhere. How she'd decided that the only way to get the twins to call off the war was to call in someone who they'd have to listen to.

"And that person, Nick Cleveland, is you," she finished. "After that altitude record setting of yours, they've idolised you. They're always talking about you. They don't make a habit of listening to authority figures, but since when have you been a source of authority? Listen, Nick. Flitwick can't control them, Dad can't control them, Annabel doesn't want to, and god knows, they never listen to me! But they might, just might, listen to you! Nick, everyone in this house looks up to you, everyone. If you can't sort my sibs out, no one will. Please, for Luna's sake if not mine, will you help me out before her weirdness turns into full-blown schizophrenia?"

Nick and Melinda had both listened in silence as Penelope spoke. She looked at them hopefully as she finished. Were they going to help?

The signs seemed good. Nick at least looked stunned that all this had been going on. He'd always prided himself on being a man with his finger on the pulse, and was no doubt kicking himself at not realising all this sooner. So far, so good. Then Penelope dared to shoot a glance at Melinda.

The girl's face had frozen, giving it a masklike quality, with no hint of what lay beneath. Until you looked into her eyes, and saw a smouldering rage, all the more deadly for being banked underneath the outer ice. Penelope began to wonder if she'd done the right thing. She was remembering a fight Melinda had got into with Marlie after the former had suspected the latter of chasing after her boyfriend. The consequences had not been good for either girl and Marlie could easily have been killed; perhaps would have been if her friends had not been there, and if Peeves hadn't sawed through a nearby set of railings. Melinda had the same look in her eyes then. Gods help me, I've just set her on my siblings?? Penelope felt her blood freeze.

Fortunately, Nick had also reached the same conclusions. As Melinda got up and strode purposefully off in the direction the twins had gone in earlier, he leapt to his feet and ran after her, grabbing her by the arm and turning her to face him.

"Melinda, wait! What are you doing?" he demanded.

"Going after that... that whore! And that..." here she said something in Mandarin that roughly translated as 'disembowelled lubricated eunuch', "of a brother of hers!" She tried to squirm out of Nick's grip.

"You can't!" Nick told her firmly. Despite recent anger management treatment, Melinda was still dangerous when her wrath was aroused, and Nick had no wish to drag her out of yet another catfight.

"Don't tell me what I can and can't do, Nick Cleveland!" she raged back at him. Then she seemed to realise what she'd said and the fire went out completely. "Oh, Nick!" she gasped in horror. "Nick, I'm so sorry! Please forgive me!" She hung her head in shame.

Nick, smiling with relief, lifted her chin. "Hey, don't worry. It's OK. But you have to remember, violence is not the answer." A rather cold smile

spread over his features. "The judiciously applied threat of violence, however, can solve all sorts of problems. Come on. Let's discuss what we're going to do." He returned to where Penelope, studiously avoiding looking at them, was still sitting. Melinda followed him, taking a seat next to Penelope.

"I'm sorry," said Melinda quietly. "I didn't mean to be so emotional. It's just that... I used to get bullied by my older cousins when I was younger, and when I heard it was happening to young Luna..." She closed her eyes and turned away.

"That's quite alright," said Penelope nervously, glancing at Nick. He didn't seem to be too worried, so she assumed everything was now under control. "If I might just ask one question... how do you know Luna? I mean, she's not kin to you, she's a good few years younger and I've never really seen the two of you hang out together. I'm just wondering why you're getting so worked up about this."

Melinda looked up, an astonished expression on her face. "Isn't it obvious?"

"Er... no, not really," Penelope admitted.

The other girl sighed. "No, I suppose not to a Westerner. Have you ever read the Tao Te Ching? Nick, I know you have."

"In the original Mandarin, no less," Nick grinned.

"I can't say I have," said Penelope guardedly, although it sounded familiar. Quite probably it was on one of the common room's many bookshelves. She made a mental note to have a look for it later.

"You should," said Melinda. "It'll help you understand Luna better. Penelope, she has the Tao!"

"The Tao?" Penelope asked, confused.

"Maybe you'd better explain a little bit about the Tao, Melinda," Nick supplied. "I'm not sure Penelope gets it."

Melinda sighed, frustrated. "It's not something you can put into words! Especially not English words. English is such a pragmatic language, all the Germanic ones are, if you can't pin something down, you can't describe it in them. But I'll try my best. Someone with the Tao is a very special, unique person. Muggle or mage, they have powers we can only begin to imagine. Very often, those less developed have problems around them, feel uncomfortable with them. This is especially so in Western cultures, where everything is all about what you've got, about achieving things, about acquiring status. Back home, all that is seen as, not irrelevant exactly, but not the be-all and end-all either. Far more important is how someone relates to what happens around them, how in tune they are with life."

"How well they deal with life's problems?" said Penelope thoughtfully.

"Partly. But it's more than that. It's how they deal with emotions full stop. To be truly wise, truly a follower of the Tao, one must be able to remain calm at all times, not getting too attached to anything, because everything is temporary. To accept anything that happens because everything happens for a reason. To just instinctively know what must be done and do it, not because anyone taught you or because you've memorised a long list of commandments, but because that is what you know must be done." She looked away. "I am very far from achieving that."

Nick took her by the hand. "You're doing very well. You've made a lot of progress. And isn't part of attaining the Tao learning to accept yourself as you are, faults and all?"

Melinda had to smile at them. "I suppose so. But this is Luna we're talking about, is it not? And, from what I've seen of her, and what you've told me, she has it, or is well on the way to attaining it. The way she just accepts how her cousins treat her, and even smiles at it...!" Melinda shook her head. "They say she even witnessed her

mother's death, and yet she will talk of it as easily as you or I would talk about what we had for breakfast this morning. They say she knows things about people, knows about things she should not know. Whether it is what you call Sight, or merely that no one pays her any attention and so does not bother concealing things from her any more than they would their pet cat, I do not know. But she has something. And that (trans: Keeper of Eunuchs who thinks herself Emperor!) and her honourless brother would think to torment her!" Melinda's wrath was starting to rise again.

"But you and Nick are going to stop them, right?" said Penelope uncertainly, flicking a glance at Nick. He caught her eye and gently laid his fingers on Melinda's arm.

"Of course we will, Penny," he said reassuringly. He gave Melinda a meaningful look. "Aren't we?" Penelope noticed that he emphasised the word 'we'. Clearly he didn't want Melinda undertaking any independent vigilante action. Penelope was secretly quite relieved - she might not always like her siblings but she didn't want to see them get hurt.

"Thank you," said Penelope softly. "Is there anything you need me to do?"

Nick shook his head, the germs of a plan already formulating in his mind. "No, not really. Just keep an eye on Luna. Leave the rest to us."

Penny smiled gratefully, promised to do just that and left. Melinda turned to Nick, curious as to what he had planned.

"Well? You've got something in mind, I can tell. Spit it out. Is it good? It had better be, I was looking forward to giving that Clearwater tart a piece of my mind."

"Oh you'll still be able to, don't worry," Nick said silkily. "It's just that we need to do more than persuade the twins to back off. Even if they do, it's only a matter of time before another set of bullies decide to make her their target. No, what we need to do, aside from terrifying the twins into submission, is ensure that Luna is protected in the long term too."

"And how are we to do that?" Melinda asked.

"Simple. Penny mentioned how it was the Slytherins who brought the matter to her attention. Well, I think it's time Luna's other cousins did their share as well."

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"So what exactly is this thing you're taking me to then?" Deanna asked idly. "Dare I hope for something straightforward and peaceful?"

"As if," Mike Lovegood grinned as he led the way to one of the dungeon cells nearer the surface. "Did Luella mention a Ravenclaw kid by the name of Luna to you?"

"Did she ever!" Deanna laughed. "Told me and Rianne all about this newly discovered Lovegood only this morning." A day had now passed after Penelope's conversation with Nick and Melinda, and it was coming up to seven o'clock. Deanna

knew all about Luna by now, and had spent most of the day teasing Marlie about it. However, she hadn't expected to be involved directly until Mike Lovegood had approached her at dinner and asked if she could assist with something. He'd not been forthcoming with the details though. Did he need someone to hold the twins down while he gave them a good kicking? Or did he just need a girl along to deal with Rachel while he sorted out Paul? Difficult to tell. Whatever, he'd been most insistent that it had to be her. Deanna had shrugged and decided to go along. So here they were, walking along to a secret meeting in one of the more accessible dungeons. Intrigue, and the possibility of violence. Deanna liked this more and more by the second.

"So may I take it that this little soiree is to do with the junior Lovegood then?"

"Yep. Nick Cleveland from Ravenclaw filled me in on what the Nerds have been doing to the Lunatic, and asked me if I'd help sort them out. Apparently, him and his girlfriend, Melinda Yang are going to meet up with the twins and have a little chat, and they want a family member along to observe proceedings, as well as make it clear that the rest of the family do not appreciate their behaviour. I'm the oldest, so they asked me."

Deanna wasn't listening. One name had stopped her in her tracks.

"Melinda Yang's going to be there?"

"Yeah, why- oh for gods' sake, Tyler. She's not going to lay a finger on you!"

Deanna was not convinced.

"Mike, the woman's a total psycho! You saw what she did to Marlie that time!" Deanna protested.

"Marlie wasn't the one in a coma for a week, was she? Anyway, Marlie was making a play for her boyfriend. You're not going to tell me it wasn't going to end badly, are you now? Or that Marlie was the innocent victim in all that?"

"Well, no," Deanna admitted. "But all the same, being stuck in a small room with her, with only one exit, and stone walls and floor, lest we

forget, does not sound like a good idea! Mike, why me? Can't Tish do this? Or Lucas? Anybody but me!"

"Tyler..." Mike sighed. "Listen, how do you think I felt about being in the same room with someone who hates my sis with a passion? That's why I want you along, as back up! I need someone good in a fight, who will be on my side should things turn nasty. And there is no one in Slytherin House who can fight like you. Besides, Nick assured me that Melinda will behave herself. Apparently she's been doing anger management over the summer and is progressing very well. Nick vouches for her personally."

"Of course. The oh so trustworthy Mr. Cleveland. Mike, need I remind you that this is the person who singlehandedly caused the biggest fight the Slytherin Common Room has ever seen?"

"Yeah, but he didn't actually lie, did he?" Mike pointed out. "I mean, he kept his word, didn't he?" "That, Mike Lovegood, is what makes him so dangerous!" Deanna snapped. "You have to watch him, really watch him. Why didn't you tell me he was involved? Rianne's the one you want here! She's good at spotting loopholes. You know that she and Luella came out of that fight virtually unscathed? The injuries you saw on them afterwards were glamoured on. And they sneaked off with most of the chocolate while everyone else was busy fighting!"

Mike couldn't help grinning. It wasn't a shock - everyone knew that Rianne was slippery. However, it wasn't Rianne he wanted alongside him.

"Tyler, please. He only torments people when they need it. As far as I know, you've been impeccably behaved ever since the term started. Haven't you?" He fixed her with an intense stare.

"Yes, Mike," said Deanna.

"Glad to hear it. Anyway, I also need someone to act as look out in case a teacher turns up. Down here, it's only going to be Snape, and he's always liked you. Besides, when I mentioned to Nick I was bringing you along, he seemed quite pleased. Reckoned he wanted to talk to you about something."

That did it. Deanna went pale.

"Oh my god!" she yelped. "He said that?? Artemis help me... Right. That does it. I am going back. I'll send Rianne over - she's got an instinct for avoiding trouble. Whatever Cleveland has got planned, I want no part of it!"

"Tyler, wait!" Mike grabbed her by the arm. "Look, I will be there, I promise. If it looks like he's up to anything shady or underhand, I will get the topic straight back on to Luna, I swear. And as soon as the twins are sorted out, we'll say our goodbyes and go back, OK? Tyler, that's why I suggested luring the twins to a dungeon rendezvous. The whole thing's on our territory, not theirs. I visited the dungeon at lunch time and installed a couple of panic buttons. One's really obvious, he'll spot that in no time, one's not so obvious but I still expect him to find it, one's well hidden but not quite hidden enough, and the other is virtually impossible to locate. Of course he and Melinda will get there first and search the cell thoroughly. I'm banking on him finding the first one, guessing we'd not be so stupid as to just have one, search harder, find the second, look again because he's a paranoid bugger, eventually find the third after a really long search and think he's got the better of us."

Deanna was impressed. "Smart. Very smart. Auntie Mel has taught you well. I'm guessing that the buttons trigger off alarms in the Nest, and Laetitia comes running with every prefect we've got, along with every other notable Slytherin she can lay hands on."

"Yep," Mike grinned. "See, Tyler, you'll be quite safe. One casting of the Sonorus Alarum charm, and help will be on the way. Of course, I expect they'll probably install something similar themselves, but it'll

take a lot longer for the Ravenclaws to get here and by the time they do, the incredibly narrow corridor that is the only way of

getting down here will be blocked with a load of pissed off Slytherins. See, I have thought of everything."

"Impressive," said Deanna thoughtfully. "Well, you've almost convinced me. Very well. I'll go along. On one condition. That you let me run back to the dorm and grab something of mine."

Mike tutted, glancing at his watch. "Gods almighty, Tyler. We're meant to be meeting in ten minutes, which means they will have been there at least twenty minutes already, and we should have been there now ourselves. Go on then, hurry up. But be quick about it!"

Deanna promised she would, and hurried off down the corridor. True to her word, she was soon back with a black bundle under her arm. Mike didn't like the look of it. It had a disturbingly weaponlike look about it. He was proved right when Deanna pulled the cloak away to reveal a huge double-bladed axe. Although clearly new and very, very sharp, it was not bejewelled, nor did it have any decoration on the handle whatsoever. It was what it looked like; a plain and simple weapon of mass destruction. Deanna was caressing it lovingly.

"Isn't it lovely?" she said, clearly besotted. "It's a labrys. Mum gave it to me for my birthday."

Mike could only groan to himself. That was all he needed, an armed and dangerous Deanna.

"Tyler, I can see what it is. My question is, what is it doing in school?"

"It's because of Sirius Black," Deanna replied. "In case he comes after us. He'll be expecting wands, but he won't be expecting an axe in his innards, will he?"

Mike just stared at her. "You, Tyler, are seriously weird."

"What?" Deanna protested. "You're not telling me I'm the only one in Slytherin packing steel now, are you?"

"You're the only one packing that amount," said Mike, eyeing the axe warily. It was almost as big as Deanna herself. If you placed one end on the floor, the other end would come up to Deanna's waist, while the distance from one the edge of one blade to the edge of the other was longer than that between Deanna's shoulders. It was a serious bit of kit. "Well, no help for it now. It'll focus the twins' attention anyway. Just keep it covered up until they arrive, that's all. We don't want Nick and Melinda thinking you don't trust them."

"I don't though, and they both know it," Deanna pointed out.

"Yes, but let's at least try and act friendly, eh? We don't want to antagonise them. OK, we're here." He indicated a doorway nearby.

"Put the axe to one side, try and be nice to them, and remember, you are not doing this for you or for them, you are doing this to help my little cousin. Got that?"

"Yes, Mike."

"Good. Now let's go in."

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As Mike had predicted, Nick and Melinda were there, and appeared to have made themselves at home. The cell, used frequently as a rendezvous spot for Slytherins having business with members of other houses, was decked out in Mafia Boss Chic, the furniture consisting of a mahogany table and several matching chairs, upholstered in Slytherin Green, lit from above by a luminous crystal in a Muggle lightshade. Additional lighting was provided by some wall-torches, carefully enchanted with Smokeless Charms. All in all, it was a room Tony Soprano would have been proud of.

"Hello there, Michael," Nick greeted him, lounging in the chair at the head of the table. "Nice to see you here." He indicated the table in front of him, on which there were three Alarm Crystals. Deanna was impressed. Mike evidently knew his stuff.

"We found these hidden in various locations around the room," Nick continued. "I don't suppose you have any idea as to how they got there, do you?"

Mike did not bat an eyelid. "Not got a clue, Nick," he said calmly, his eyes fixed on a point just to the right of Nick's head. "Must have been left there by the last people to use this room."

"Really." Nick appeared unconvinced. "Well, you'll no doubt be pleased to know that we didn't find the fourth one. Where was it, under a flagstone or embedded on top of one of the torches?"

"Wouldn't know anything about that, Nick," said Mike, his eyes never wavering from that fascinating point just behind the Ravenclaw. Deanna couldn't help but admire her house mate. This man was good. Truly his mother's son.

"Hmm." Nick didn't believe him for a second but decided not to press the point. This was not the time for petty point scoring. "Well, as a gesture of trust, and because we are here for humanitarian reasons, I shall let it go. I'm a little upset that you trust us so little as to install a security panic system, but then again you are a Slytherin and Melissa Lovegood's son, trust is probably not your strong point."

Mike did not disagree, smiling at this. "You flatter me. But enough about me. We're here about Luna, aren't we?"

"We are," Nick conceded. He turned to Deanna, with a smile that showed just a few too many of his teeth. "Well, hello, Deanna Tyler. We meet again. How was your summer?"

"Not bad," said Deanna, eyeing him carefully and tightening her grip on her axe. "Yours?"

"Oh good, good. Listen, I'm glad you came along. Melinda here has something she'd like to say to you, don't you, Melinda?" He turned to Melinda, seated on his left, who hadn't moved since they'd entered. Deanna noticed that for some reason, the sixth year seemed nervous. This didn't stop Deanna from clutching her axe to her chest and scrutinising the other girl's every move. Unfortunately for her, Mike noticed.

"Tyler," he murmured a warning to her. "Put it down." Here he prised her fingers away from her bundle and took it off her, before placing it in the corner near the door and steering her gently towards Melinda. For her part, Melinda had got out of her chair and was now being prodded in Deanna's direction by Nick, standing just behind her.

"Go on," Nick coaxed his unwilling girlfriend. "Tell her what we discussed earlier."

Discussed what, exactly? Deanna's instincts were buzzing overtime. Had Mike known about this? Something in his eyes hinted that he may have suspected as much, although his face was giving nothing away.

Melinda was standing no more than two feet away now, staring at the floor. She began to stammer out a sentence.

"I... that is... I mean, Nick and I were talking earlier... and my therapist agreed, and..." She turned to Nick for support.

"Go on," he murmured gently. "You're doing fine." Seemingly encouraged, Melinda swallowed and carried on.

"And I just wanted to say... that I'm... I'm... sorryforthefightbetweenmeandMarlieLovegood," she said, evidently wanting to get it out as soon as she could. Having managed it, she took a deep breath and fell silent, turning to Nick with a relieved smile. He squeezed her shoulder, clearly proud of her.

"Um.. thanks," said Deanna. Of all the things to come up, she'd not expected that, although in hindsight the issue could not have been avoided forever. She felt the tension inside starting to melt away, and her feelings towards the other girl became perceptibly warmer. That had been tough for her.

"On behalf of Marlie, I'd like to say that she's sorry too, she never meant for things to go as far as they did, honestly thought you and Nick had split up, has learned her lesson, and will never bother you or Nick again."

Melinda nodded mutely, seeming to accept this. She finally met Deanna's eyes, and Deanna was surprised to see hope in them.

"I... can we... I mean, if you don't want to, but... I'd just like to say that you are a fearless and honourable warrior and I really respect you for that, and... can we... can we be... not-enemies?" She sounded breathless, almost as if she expected to be rebuffed on the spot. Deanna wondered why on earth she'd been frightened. Melinda Yang was perfectly nice if you approached her the right way and didn't try
and get

between her and Nick. While Deanna didn't know if they'd ever be close, exactly, she did know that she no longer feared her in quite the same way. She smiled at her.

"OK then." She extended a hand. "Not-enemies." The two girls shook hands, Melinda smiling quite uncharacteristically. The two men exchanged looks of relief. With the tension between Deanna and Melinda resolved, things could only go smoothly from here.

"Right, well if that's all, we'd better start planning for the meeting," said Mike, rubbing his hands. "I make it seven o'clock exactly, which means we can expect the twins to put in an appearance about five or ten minutes from now. Does anyone have any ideas?"

"Well, we'll need someone guarding the door, in order to close it behind them as they come in and stop them from trying to escape," mused Nick. "Would anyone be offended if I nominated Deanna for that job?"

Oddly enough, no one was. Deanna took up her place behind the door, removing the cloak from her axe. It got a few stares from Nick and Melinda but they didn't say anything. It was an open secret that while other girls had had Care Bears and My Little Pony as kids, Deanna had been playing with miniature crossbows and ninja throwing knives.

After much discussion, it was decided that Nick would lead up the discussion, with Mike and Melinda behind him as back-up and intimidation. The actual style was going to be ultra-reasonable on the whole, with Mike and Melinda doing a version of Nice-Cop, Nasty-Cop. Deanna was just going to watch and observe, as well as guarding the door and preventing an escape attempt.

Nick settled himself back at the head of the table, with Mike and Melinda positioned behind him. Out in the corridor, they could hear the echoing voices of the two Ravenclaws, blissfully unaware of what awaited them. With a word, Mike extinguished the lights. Silently, they waited for the twosome to come in.

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An eternity later, the door creaked open as the twins peered into the gloom.

"Hello? Marlie?" Rachel called out. No answer. She turned to Paul. "She's not here yet. Think we should wait for her?"

"Yeah, may as well," said Paul, edging his way in. "You know what she's like. Never on time." The fact that the two of them were ten minutes late themselves was apparently lost on them.

"Tell you what, these dungeons are bloody dark," muttered Rachel, folding her arms, now standing about a foot inside. "No wonder Marls bought half the Argos catalogue's lighting section for her common room. Don't blame her, if I had to live down here, I'd be redesigning the place too. Pauly, how do you turn the lights on in this place?"

Deanna took her cue. They were both well inside by now. Far enough in not to get whacked by the door getting pushed shut behind them.

"Lumos." A wand flared into life in the corner. The twins, already spooked by the door slamming shut, spun round to see the light and screamed. Deanna had attached her wand to the handle of her axe, pointing upwards, and the green wandlight illuminated her grinning face from below. It also outlined the blades of her axe quite nicely too. All in all, it was not something you wanted to run into in a dark dungeon.

"Hey kids," Deanna gloated. "Welcome to Slytherinland!"

"What do you want?" Rachel quavered, clinging on to her brother.

"Just to talk to you," Deanna said softly, taking a step forward. Lowering the axe, she began to swing it idly from side to side.

"Don't hurt us," Paul whispered, his knees shaking.

"Hurt you?" Deanna blinked, surprised that they'd think any such thing. Then she seemed to notice the axe as if for the first time. "Oh, you mean this? Good lord, am I still carrying this? I thought I'd left it in my dorm. No wonder Rianne and Lu were giving me funny looks as I left."

"Why are you swinging it around like that?" That was Rachel, always the curious Ravenclaw.

Deanna shrugged. "No idea. Just a nervous tic I have. But it is interfering with the light rather, so why don't I put the main light on?" With a simple spell, she switched on the central light, illuminating the central table... and Mike, Nick and Melinda grouped around it. Rachel and Paul let go of each other.

"Oh gods," Paul whispered. Rachel, now that she appeared to be in no immediate danger of being hacked to death by a psychotic Deanna, had regained her courage.

"What is this?" she demanded. Nick smiled at her, the smile that always showed just a few too many teeth.

"Hello, my dear," he drawled. "We were hoping to have a little chat with the two of you. Why don't you and your brother take a seat?" He indicated the two chairs either side of him. Warily, Rachel took the seat on his right, Paul rather more nervously taking the one on Nick's left. Melinda took up the place behind Rachel, while Mike stood behind Paul, his hand on the trembling boy's shoulder. Oddly enough, the gesture seemed to make Paul more rather than less worried. Deanna, her job mostly done, sat down with her back to the door, grinning at them as she played with her axe.

"Hello, Cuz One and Cuz Two," Mike grinned. He pouted as he noticed their poker faces. "What, no words of greeting for your big cousin?"

"Hi, Mike," the twins chorused. Mike Lovegood carried weight in his family.

"Better," Mike noted. "You're not completely blind to family protocol then. We did wonder."

"See," Nick took up the interrogation, "we've been hearing disturbing rumours about you two. Nasty rumours. Rumours involving your little cousin Luna."

Neither twin moved a muscle. Nick wasn't bothered. They were only young Ravenclaws, after all. They wouldn't take long to break, not Paul anyway. Rachel might take longer though. But that was alright. He only needed to break one.

"We've heard that you've been less than charitable towards her," Nick continued. "Teasing her and making her life a misery, is what we heard. Isn't that right, Mike?"

Mike nodded. "Oh yeah. I couldn't believe it when I heard. Picking on Luna like that, disgusting." He tightened his grip on Paul's shoulder. "Did your parents never tell you about kin obligations?" Beneath his iron grip, Paul began to twitch.

On the other side of the table, Melinda's self-control began to snap, as she leaned closer to Rachel.

"How could you?" she hissed. "Your own cousin, your own flesh and blood! She was in your house, you had responsibility for her, and you torment her! I do not believe your nerve, Clearwater. Your older sister must be thanking Kwan Yin that she only shares one parent with you." Her nails began to dig into Rachel's shoulders, causing the younger girl to cry out. "She has the Tao, you miserable tart!" Melinda raged, starting to shake the girl. "Of course you wouldn't know what means, would you, ignorant Westerner that you are! Well, it means she's better

than any of us, more spiritually advanced than any of us! And you have the affrontery to treat her like a beast, worse than a beast!" Her face was right alongside Rachel, the Chinese girl hissing in her ear. "Your karma will be in the gutter for this - Kwan Yin herself would have difficulty being merciful!"

"Melinda," Nick cautioned her. "That's enough." He flexed his fingers, pondering his next move. "Would either of you care to enlighten me as to the truth? I'd like to hear your version of events." When no one answered, he dropped the nice front. "Now, please."

"We weren't teasing her, we were just having a bit of fun..." Rachel began, before flinching as Melinda really dug her nails in, while Nick banged his fist on the table.

"The truth, if you please!" Nick snarled. Rachel could only whimper. Finally, it was Paul who snapped.

"I'm sorry," he cried out. "It's our mum, she's always looked down Luna's dad, and, and, Rachel and I have been saying the same sort of thing about Luna ever since we were old enough. And when she started school, we started talking even more, and after Penny got Petrified, it kind of got out of hand..." He pointed at his sister, anger finally spilling out. "It was her idea! Blame her! I just did what she told me!"

"That is such a lie, Paul Clearwater!" Rachel yelled. "You came up with at least half the pranks! Don't you even think of blaming it all on me!"

"Not without you egging me on, I wouldn't..." Paul began, before Nick made a gesture with his hands and both Mike and Melinda took hold of their respective twins and gave their necks a short, sharp squeeze. As the twins gasped for breath, Nick began to talk again.

"I do not care who started it or how," he said softly. "All I care about is that Luna has done nothing to deserve this, and it ends. Tonight. If you cannot bring yourselves to be nice to her, you will leave her alone. Do you understand me?"

Mike and Melinda released them. The twins nodded, Rachel massaging her throat and Paul coughing.

"There's something else you should know," Mike said calmly. "You know my other cousin, Draco Malfoy?"

They nodded. Everyone knew Malfoy. They also knew his two friends, who proved beyond doubt that humanity had indeed evolved from apes.

"Well," Mike continued, enjoying this immensely, "it would appear young Mr. Malfoy's taken quite a shine to our Luna. Reckons he's thinking of adopting her as his little sister. He's quite looking forward to having a little sis to look out for and be protective to. Ain't that right, Tyler?"

"Absolutely," Deanna confirmed. "Marlie's most put out about it. Think she's just jealous, myself. Doesn't want to fight for his attention with another adopted sister."

This was not what the twins had wanted to hear. They all knew Draco's reputation, and they also knew that you did not piss off the female relatives of Draco Malfoy if you did not want to end up with your head down a toilet, getting punched in the stomach repeatedly while getting a lecture on the correct treatment of females. Rachel realised with a sinking feeling in her stomach that with Pansy Parkinson on her case, she'd probably be getting the worst of it.

"I don't normally think much of Draco Malfoy," Melinda sniffed, "but in this case, I will gladly help him out if he needs help."

"Seconded," Deanna announced before shivering. "Gods almighty, I'm agreeing with Malfoy. How sick is that?"

"So you see," Nick summed up with a grin, "Luna's not so defenceless as you thought. Now, we're all busy people so let's bring this to a conclusion. You two are going to promise not to bully Luna anymore. You either be genuinely friendly or you leave her alone. Clear?"

"Yes, Nick," said the twins, their earlier bravado gone. Hands were put on the table, and Nick extracted promises from the two of them, both on their own behalf and on

behalf of their friends who had also joined in, never to tease, bully or pick on Luna ever again, on pain of extreme unpleasantness.

Satisfied, Nick let them go. The twins finally slunk out, tails between their legs. Deanna was gratified to notice as she held the door open for them, that they both shrank back from her axe. She really ought to carry this around more often, it had an amazing effect on people. Too bad she couldn't use it openly. She wondered if her mother had actually told Snape about it. It hadn't been confiscated yet, which had to be a good sign.

The twins gone, the meeting started to break up.

"Well, Nick, nice talking like this," said Mike, shaking his hand. "Thanks for everything, you were the man. You too, Melinda, except you're not the man, obviously." He shook hands with her too, before turning to Deanna. "Come on, you axe-wielding psycho, you, let's get you back to the common room before the rugrats trash the place."

The two Slytherins turned to go, before Nick stopped them.

"Wait."

They turned to look. Nick beckoned them over.

"Before you go. There's one more thing to discuss. Luna's future. Her cousins are off her back, true, but let's face it, she's still friendless, and we can't all be there to look after her the whole time. Even with Malfoy's protection, she's still vulnerable to the next lot of bullies looking for an easy target. She needs friends, Mike. She needs a little gang of girl friends, bit like Deanna's set, to look out for her and head off trouble before it arrives." He looked meaningfully at Mike. "I'm not expecting you to actually sort her out, but I know you've got the connections to get something done. Promise me you'll see to it?"

Mike nodded, before he and Deanna took their leave. However, just before he closed the door behind him, he turned to Nick with a grin.

"Oh, Nick."

"Yes?"

"The fourth panic button. Third torch on the left. Hidden inside the flammable bit. You were spot on, you know. If you ever need a job, contact my mum, she'll hire you on the spot. Go safe now, you two." With a wink, he was gone.

Nick could only smile ruefully. "I think I'll have to watch that one," he said thoughtfully. "You spend six years thinking he's just a dumb blonde Quidditch head, then you find out his mum's taught him everything she knows. Except she probably hasn't, because god knows she always likes to stay a few steps ahead of everyone else, but it's still more than I thought."

Melinda wasn't paying attention. "Do you think he'll really make sure Luna's OK?" she asked, distracted.

"Oh I'm sure he'll just pass the problem on to Marlie and leave it at that," Nick yawned.

"Nick!" Melinda gasped. "You made him promise to sort her out with friends!"

"Calm down, Mel," Nick grinned. "Marlie'll come through. Because if she doesn't, Draco Malfoy will start making his interest in Luna public, and when he does that, the whole of Slytherin House will start gossiping and it will publicly come out that Marlie's uncle edits the very publication she openly mocks. She will not want that to happen if she can avoid it. Trust me, within days, Luna will have more mates than she knows what to do with."

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Nick Cleveland was a better judge of human nature than many non-Ravenclaws gave him credit for. Mike had indeed gone straight to his sister and, much to Deanna's amusement, had landed her with the task of finding friends for Luna. After all, he said, "you've done sod all so far apart from talk to Draco and Lu, and you do that virtually every day of your life". In Mike's view, it was about time Marlie actually put some effort in to helping Luna. Marlie's reaction was equally predictable.

"I can't believe my brother just did this to me!" she whined to Deanna. "Where the hell am I going to find someone crazy enough to want to hang around with Luna Lovegood?"

"I'm sure you'll manage," Deanna opined. "After all, you manage to sort Ginny out last year. Luna can't be any worse, can she?"

"You'd be surprised - hey!" Marlie's eyes lit up. "You've just given me an idea!"

So it was that Ginny and her two friends found themselves trudging after Marlie towards the library. Marlie had already used Deanna's falcon to send a mysterious note out with, and she was now taking them on a visit to meet 'a friend of hers'.

"Who do you think it is?" Autumn whispered.

Ginny shook her head. "No idea. It's not a Slytherin, and it can't be Fred and George, what would be the point of introducing me to my own brothers?"

"We're heading towards the Ravenclaw end of the school, I think," murmured Lydia. "Doesn't Marlie have cousins there?"

"Yeah, the Clearwaters," Ginny confirmed. "But I've met all three before now, I can't see why Marlie would want to introduce us again."

Lydia's thoughts, however, were beginning to follow a different path. She was remembering a girl in their year, same surname as Marlie, same blonde hair, although

neither of the Slytherin Lovegoods had ever owned her as kin. Alone, friendless, Ravenclaw, and considered odd even by her housemates. Normally Lydia and friends ignored her as beneath their notice - but Lydia also prided herself on knowing what was going on around her, and she was well aware of everything that was said about Luna Lovegood. Right now she hoped and prayed that it wasn't Luna they were going to meet. Her intuition, however, hinted otherwise.

Marlie led them to the library and told them to wait near a certain set of shelves. A few minutes passed, then part of the shelves suddenly revolved around, revealing a brief glimpse of another room looking a bit like a Victorian study. However, the shelves soon closed, leaving a set of book almost identical to the others... and standing in front, a blonde second year Ravenclaw wearing junk jewellery and with a Defence

textbook under her arm. Lydia could only groan silently. Her worst fears had been realised.

"Kids, this is my cousin Luna Lovegood," Marlie announced with a grin. "I expect you know her, she's in your year after all. Luna, allow me to introduce my good friends Ginny Weasley, Autumn Montague and Lydia Vetinari."

"Pleased to meet you," said Luna, fidgeting on the spot shyly. Normally rather talkative, the surprise of her favourite cousin not only wanting to meet her, but introducing her to her friends, had made her clam up. Still, she was smiling which, Marlie noticed, could only be a good thing. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for the three Slytherins, whose expressions ranged from horror to blank astonishment. "Well?" Marlie snapped. "Aren't you three going to say hello?"

"Um... hello," said Autumn, remembering her manners. "I'm Autumn. How are you?"

"OK," Luna grinned, amazed at someone actually talking to her. "Doing Professor Lupin's assignment on Augureys. He's a fascinating teacher, isn't he?"

"He certainly is that," Autumn admitted. "I really like him. How's your essay going?"

With that, Luna and Autumn launched into a conversation that started with Augureys, before moving on to various other magical creatures. Luna appeared delighted to hear that Autumn's parents bred winged horses, while Autumn for her part seemed fascinated, if a little sceptical, by Luna's stories of hunting the Crumple-Horned Snorkback in Finland.

Lydia and Ginny, however, were a little less pleased.

"Marlie," said Ginny quietly, "why are you introducing us all? We are all second years, we did know who Luna is."

"Do you?" Marlie asked, blinking in faux-innocence. "You surprise me, you normally act as if she's not there."

"Yes, because she's a bloody freak," Lydia seethed. However, a glare from Marlie shut her up.

"She's my cousin," Marlie snapped. "And she's not a freak. She's just a little bit odd, that's all."

Lydia looked disbelieving but did not press the point. It was Ginny who spoke up next.

"OK, OK, we'll accept that she's not a complete nutcase. But why have you brought us all here? You've surely got some plan in mind."

"Well, yes," Marlie confessed. "Basically, she has no friends. Her situation is a bit like yours when you got here, Gin. Everyone thinks she's an outcast, and ignores her, when they're not picking on her that is. Anyway, we've all decided that it has to stop, and I've ended up with the job of providing friends for little Luna. And you, Ginny Weasley, are going to be one of them."

"Me?" Ginny whispered. "Why me?"

"Because," sighed Marlie, "you're in her year and you're the only one of the second years I really know that well. Also, I helped get you settled in during your first year, and it's about time you returned the favour by helping out my cousin. Third, Autumn seems to like her, so it looks like you might not have a choice."

Both Ginny and Lydia looked over to where Autumn and Luna were now sitting, going over schoolwork and chatting. Admittedly, Luna was doing most of the talking, but Autumn seemed interested. She noticed the two girls watching her and mouthed 'Isn't Luna sweet?' Lydia could only groan.

"Autumn Montague, you're as mad as she is," Lydia muttered. Ginny, however, smiled back.

"Oh, alright then," she sighed. "She's in the group. Come on, Lydia, let's go and talk to her."

Seeing that she was outnumbered, Lydia gave in and joined them. Job done, Marlie turned and left with a self-satisfied grin. All in a good day's work.

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"So that's it," Marlie finished as she recounted the night's events to her own friends. "Luna's got friends, the twins are behaving themselves, Cleveland and Yang are off our backs, Malfoy need not publicly tell the world that the Quibbler editor is my uncle, and my brother can get back to his usual slacking. All is well with the world!"

"So it is," Rianne remarked. "And you even have your Quidditch place back too."

"I do indeed!" Marlie grinned. "Life, my friends, is good."

"There's just one thing that I don't get," said Luella thoughtfully, sucking the end of her quill. She was lying on her bed, putting the finishing touches to her Herbology essay. "Luna's got the same surname as you, right?"

"That's right," Marlie nodded. "Our dads are brothers."

"That's what I thought. So how come we've never heard of her sooner? I mean, I'd have been right on to you at the Sorting if I'd heard another Lovegood announced. Why didn't we hear her name called?"

All eyes were on Marlie. It was going to be interesting seeing how she reacted to this one. She did not disappoint.

"Oh, that's easy," said Marlie. "She wasn't there. The summer before she was due to go, she was out of the country, hiking around Canada with her father in search of the Manitoba Man-eater, and before you ask, no I haven't heard of it either. See, without a woman in the house to organise him and remind him of these things, Aunt Elizabeth having died a few years ago, he'd completely forgotten how old Luna was, and if you ask me, he'd forgotten that eleven year olds start Hogwarts the September after their birthday too."

The other girls tutted in amazement that any witch or wizard could forget something as obvious as that.

"So basically, Luna and Uncle Laurie were off in the Rockies, and no one could track them down to send Luna's Hogwarts letter out to her. By the time they got hold of her, it was almost September, and by the time they'd made it back to England, got Luna her stuff and delivered her to school, the term was already three weeks old. That, by the way, is probably another reason why Luna had no friends - everyone else had already formed little cliques."

"Likely enough," said Rianne, knowing full well how children could turn on a newcomer simply for being a newcomer.

"They had to sort her in Dumbledore's office the night she did finally turn up," Marlie added. "Typical Luna, eh, always has to be different. I'm told the Sorting Hat was most put out by how irregular it all was. Still, she's sorted out now and that's all that matters."

Everyone else agreed. Luna Lovegood now had friends at least, and while things were by no means final, her future was looking good.

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Chapter Eleven Death of a Potions Master('s Reputation)

Despite the buzz it had caused among the Slytherins, Luna Lovegood's wellbeing had hardly registered with Severus Snape. He'd had far more pressing concerns on his mind, largely centring on the wellbeing of one Caitlin Tyler.

He'd last seen her on the first proper day of term. After being forced to break off their early morning encounter, he'd conducted her into his private quarters, with instructions to have a shower and get some sleep. Despite initial complaining, she'd complied. However, he'd taken no notice whatsoever of her advice not to be too hard on the kids. He'd been Tartarus itself, issuing no less than seven detentions, and leaving Gryffindor thirty points down. It would have been more had Lupin, unbeknown to Snape, not been unexpectedly generous with points in his lessons. Even Slytherin lost points, and no one came out of his lessons with their personal tally better than when they'd gone in.

By lunchtime, his fury had abated a little. Asking for lunch for two to be served to his private quarters, he returned to his bedroom, hoping Caitlin would be interested in picking up where they'd left off.

He was to be disappointed. Caitlin was awake, showered, and curled up in bed, dressed in his best black silk pyjamas. She started as he entered, then relaxed on seeing whom it was. But not entirely, he noted. That didn't bode well.

"Hello, my dear," he said softly, sitting on the edge of the bed. "How are you feeling? Did you get any sleep?"

Caitlin nodded. "Yeah, I just came in, lay down and fell asleep. Only woke up about half an hour ago. Thought I'd better have a shower before you got here. I didn't want you to think I was completely filthy."

Severus bit back the teasing comment that came to mind, instead indicating the tray that had appeared on the bedside table.

"I took the liberty of having lunch sent here. I hope it's to your taste."

Caitlin looked it over. It seemed to consist of sandwiches, with a variety of fillings that she didn't entirely recognise.

"What are they?"

"Well, my darling, these are bacon, lettuce and tomato, these are ham and French mustard, those are Cajun chicken with spicy Louisiana sauce, and those white bread ones are bacon with a disgustingly unhealthy amount of butter and ketchup. The bacon has been fried to within an inch of its life and will crisp if you but breathe on it." He noticed Caitlin's eyes light up and smirked inwardly. Aurors, they all had exactly the same tastes. Meat, meat, more meat, a bit of spicy or other strong-flavoured stuff to give it some flavour, and a little more meat to wash it all down with. They all seemed to live for protein and Caitlin was no exception. She went straight for the bacon-and-cholesterol sandwiches.

Severus helped himself to some of the ham and chicken sandwiches and diplomatically looked the other way as Caitlin devoured the rest. She'd evidently not eaten for some time, although Aurors were not noted for their appreciation of small portions at the best of times. Finally, the trays were cleared and Caitlin was cleaning herself up with a tissue.

"That," she said with a sigh of pleasure, "was pure heaven." She collapsed back against the pillow, eyes shut. "Now if you could just leave me alone for a day or two to digest all that..."

"Well, if you wish, but I have to sleep in that bed tonight, so unless you move before then, you're going to have a most uncomfortable night."

"Who says it'll be me who's uncomfortable?" Caitlin purred. "I shall sleep like the dead after the day I've had. You on the other hand will get an hour's worth if you are lucky."

"Me get an hour's worth?" Severus raised an eyebrow. "Caitlin, you are forgetting who you are talking to. I know every sleeping potion known to wizardkind. I shall have a full eight hours of unbroken sleep and wake in the morning fully refreshed." Leaning towards her, he brushed the hair away from her face, lowering his voice. "Of course, there is a fairer solution. One in which neither of us gets much sleep..." He let her imagine the possibilities as he tenderly kissed her cheek.

What he'd not expected her to do was freeze at his touch, before gently pushing him away.

"Severus..." she whispered unhappily. "Don't."

Sighing, Severus moved away. This was not going to be his day.

"What's wrong?" he asked. Something was bothering her. He just hoped she wasn't regretting what had happened earlier that morning.

"I don't know, it's just... This is all happening so quickly," she whispered. "I wasn't expecting this at all. This morning was good, I wanted it, but it was in the heat of the moment, and now I've had some time to think about it..."

He knew it. Knew something like this would happen. Knew it was just entirely too good to be true for both of them to suddenly realise they wanted each other. Resigned to a non-existent sex life by now, he wasn't going to argue.

"Of course. I understand. You're too worried about Sirius Black being loose to be able to let go enough to have sex. Is that it?"

"Something like that," Caitlin admitted. However, Severus suspected that there was more to it than that.

"I would never let him hurt you, Caitlin. Never," Severus vowed, clutching at her hand. "I would let him kill me first."

At that Caitlin started, a look of horror on her face.

"No!" she whispered. "No, no, no, not you as well! I couldn't bear it if he got to you too!"

Severus immediately realised that it hadn't perhaps been his wisest choice of words. She'd already lost too many loved ones to that monster. Guiltily, he took her in his arms.

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry. Of course I wouldn't let him kill me. I'd use every hex I knew, I promise. He'd be dead before he knew what hit him."

Caitlin relaxed a little, but she still seemed tense.

"Don't," she said quietly.

"Don't what?" Severus asked.

"Call me sweetheart." She wriggled out of his grasp and lay back down on the bed, staring into space in a foetal position. "I don't deserve it."

Of all the things she could have said, Severus hadn't seen that one coming, although, he reasoned, he quite possibly should have.

"Caitlin, if this is about what happened last September, I've put it behind me, really, I have--"

"No," she cut him off, "it's nothing to do with that. Listen, I can't explain it, but I just don't feel comfortable about the idea. Not until we've got Black. I can't say why, but I just..."

"Don't say any more," Severus murmured, stroking her hair, determined not to cut off the physical contact unless he had to. "I'll wait. You'll have him away before long, won't you?"

“I hope so,” Caitlin sighed. “I truly hope so.” She rested her head against Severus’s shoulder, as he pulled her close, kissing her gently on the forehead. She wasn’t about to tell him this, hopefully would never have to tell him, but there was one particular betrayal of Sirius Black’s that went deeper than the rest. If Severus ever heard about this particular secret, Caitlin could virtually guarantee that he’d feel as betrayed as she had once done.

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Three days later, and Caitlin finally returned to her own home. Forensics had finished examining the scene and Carmela’s final report had stated that Sirius had been able to bypass the security wards somehow. As if someone had let him in. Strange. Also very disturbing – Caitlin knew for a fact that she’d long ago revoked Sirius’s right to enter her house, and that neither she nor her children would have let a stranger in. So how had he managed it? It was a puzzle neither she nor anyone in her department

could answer. The only possible solution was if the house itself had admitted him, but even that was a mystery, as the magic on it prevented anyone entering who had harmed or intended to cause harm to the Lady of Tal-y-Rhys or her Heiress. There was simply no way Sirius could have broken that spell, apart from the one way that the Dark Lord had used all those years ago, and it definitely hadn’t been that. Such a high-profile murder would have gathered more headlines than the attack itself.

Putting the mystery aside, she greeted the two Aurors on her front gate.

“Hey Tonks. Hey Kingsley.”

“Hey Caitlin,” they chorused, waving at her with a smile. Nymphadora Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt always had been two of her favourites. Unquestionably loyal, excellent fighters and both very intelligent young people, she was proud of the way she and Melissa had trained them. They were the two brightest stars of the next generation of Aurors, and Caitlin had no doubt she’d need them.

“Shouldn’t you two be off hunting Mr. Black?” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

Tonks shook her head, which today was adorned with spiky, blond hair with silver stripes.

“Mel reckons there’s no point wandering all over the country randomly. Best if we wait for him in a place he’s likely to want to go.”

Caitlin shuddered at the thought of Sirius wanting to return. Kingsley picked up on this and immediately told the younger girl off.

“Tonks! You had to remind her! Sorry about her, Cait. Look, don’t let it get to you. Mel also doesn’t think he’ll come back here, seeing as he didn’t get what he wanted last time. Reckons he’ll try something else.”

“She thinks he’s heading to Hogwarts next,” Tonks piped up, before realising what she’d said. “But I’m sure the magic there’ll keep him out, that’s if the Dementors don’t get him first,” she added hastily.

“What, like the magic on my house should have kept him out?” Caitlin muttered darkly. Still, Hogwarts was safe enough, surely? There were too many people for a direct attack, and neither Harry nor Deanna was ever alone for long.

“Talking of Hogwarts,” Kingsley interrupted, deciding to change the subject. “You’ve got a visitor, Caitlin.”

“I have?” Caitlin said warily. Surprise visitors weren’t always welcome. “Who is it?”

“A friend of yours,” Tonks grinned. “Tall, dark and snarky. Said he was planning on staying for a few days. Something about you clearly not eating properly since Deanna went back to school and needing someone in the house who could actually cook.”

She and Kingsley watched in satisfaction as Caitlin's eyes lit up. She'd clearly guessed who it was.

"Well in that case, I'd better not keep him waiting!" Caitlin purred. "I shall see you two in due course. Let me know if anything happens, won't you?"

The two Auror guards promised that they would, and Caitlin rushed in to see what Severus had planned for her.

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She found him in the kitchen, dinner in progress.

"Severus!" she squealed. "What are you doing here?" Quite forgetting they'd promised to keep things chaste, she ran over to him and gave him a hug.

"Cooking," said Severus as he disentangled her arms from around him. "Trying to, at least. In between doing the laundry anyway. Honestly, Caitlin, this house is a tip. I looked upstairs earlier, trying to find out which room was the guest room. Caitlin, I was appalled. Clothes everywhere, underwear all over the floor, coffee mugs with things growing in them, the walls covered in posters of Quidditch stars and Muggle rock bands... And that was before I saw Deanna's room."

"It is not that bad!" Caitlin protested. It was true – Lockhart did a very good job of preventing clutter building up, Deanna wasn't normally messy, and Caitlin had barely been in since taking the kids to school.

"Only because you've not been here," Severus replied knowingly, seeming to read her mind.

“Not the point,” Caitlin pouted. “So why are you here then? You still haven’t told me.”

Severus turned serious as she said this. Pausing, he brushed the hair out of her eyes.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about you being all alone in this house after what happened. I thought you needed the company.”

“Severus, I can work quite long hours, I’m not in that often,” Caitlin began, but Severus interrupted her.

“So Melissa tells me. She’s worried about you, you know. Always at work during term, never home. She seems to think you need to relax.”

“I’ll be fine,” Caitlin snapped, irritated that Severus and Melissa had been discussing her behind her back. That was what she and Melissa were meant to do about him. It wasn’t fair doing it the other way around. Not natural.

“Yes, well, I’m sure you are,” said Severus. He’d already decided that it was best not to argue with her. It tended to get her angry and that was nearly always counter-

productive at best. “But despite the Auror guard, Black might still decide to return, and I’d feel a lot happier if you weren’t on your own here. I can sleep in the guest room; I promise I won’t get in your way. Plus I will cook dinner for you every night and give back and foot rubs after a hard day at work or training or whatever. Is this sounding tempting yet?”

"Well..." Caitlin had to admit that it was starting to sound good. "All right. You can stay, at least until we capture Sirius Black. Do you know where everything is?"

"Yes, I found everything, apart from the bathroom sink which appears to be buried under several hundred items of Muggle beauty products."

"Severus..." Caitlin warned him. A thought occurred to her. "What about the Slytherins? Don't you need to be on campus in case of emergency?"

Severus shook his head. "No. Laetitia Vetinari and Mike Lovegood know how to reach me if there are any problems, as do Madam Pomfrey, McGonagall and Albus. Everything will be fine, although I may have to work late on occasion."

"That's OK," Caitlin said with a grin. "You can plan your late shifts to coincide with mine." She rested her hand on his shoulder, suddenly feeling a lot happier than she had in months, years even. For the foreseeable future, she'd be sleeping a lot better.

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The same did not hold true for Severus. That night, he found himself plagued by dreams of a most unwelcome sort. A mocking voice echoed in his mind as memories he'd rather forget came rushing back to him.

"Why so afraid, Sevi? Don't tell me you've lost interest.... You look so cute when you're pleading for mercy.... Ah, Severus, you suffer so prettily.... You know, you look so beautiful when you're hurting..."

"No more, no more!" he cried. "Stop it, stop it now! Please, I beg you!"

"Done," an unfamiliar voice answered, although it had Caitlin's same mocking tones to it. Slowly he opened his eyes and blinked in astonishment at the apparition perched on the end of the bed. Was he awake, or still dreaming?

"Don't worry," the woman laughed. "I won't hurt you. Being dead and wandless does that to a witch."

Severus stared at her, trying to remember where he'd seen her before. She was dressed in khaki knee length shorts, with a white short-sleeved shirt, hiking boots, and a leopardskin cloak. Made with real

leopard – it still had the head on it. She bore a marked resemblance to Caitlin, except for the hair, which was dark brown with golden highlights, and the eyes, which were exactly the same shade as Albus Dumbledore's. They had that annoying twinkle too. That little detail, plus the comment about not having a wand, clinched her identity.

"You're Medea Tyler," Severus said in amazement. His life was taking a very weird turn these days. He half expected his own mother to put in an appearance next.

"That's right," Medea grinned, sliding gracefully on to the bed and crossing her legs. "And you're Severus Snape. My daughter's what you may call boyfriend." She looked him over disdainfully. "I can't say I approve, but what do I know, I'm only her mother after all."

Severus felt stung by that remark. "I'm not that bad!" he protested. Medea did not look convinced but she chose not to respond to him.

"Why are you here anyway?" he snapped. "Shouldn't you be in the Summerlands by now?"

Medea shrugged. "Should be. But Caitlin invoked the spirits of her ancestors to guard this place, so here I am. There are others around too, by the way, but as the most recently dead, I get to interact with intruders personally. Go me."

Severus glanced about uneasily. He wasn't at all sure he liked the idea of long dead Tal-y-Rhys witches watching him as he went about his business. They had a way of making one feel decidedly inferior.

“Not doing a very good job, are you?” he snapped. “You let Black get in here. Caitlin could have been killed!”

Medea gazed into the distance, a mysterious look on her face. “I had my reasons. I knew why he had come. He would not have harmed her. Had she listened to him, things would have turned out very differently.” She turned back to Severus. “But enough about Sirio Y Ddu. I’m here on your account. You’re afraid Caitlin might turn on you again.”

“No,” said Severus defiantly. He wilted under the look Medea was giving him – Occlumens he might be, but Medea was no weakling in the psychological intimidation stakes. “Maybe,” he admitted.

Medea nodded, her opinions confirmed. “As I thought. Don’t blame her myself; if I’d got my hands on you before you turned yourself in, I might have done the same. But it’s too late now. For some reason, she’s decided she likes you. You need not fear, she won’t hurt you.” She leaned forward, glaring at him. “And constrained as I am by the magic around here, neither can I.” She smiled coldly. “For as long as you remain friendly. As long as your intentions remain pure in heart, you will be safe. This house will protect you.”

Severus began to relax a little. He sensed truth in her words, although there was something in her eyes that disturbed him. She clearly knew something he didn’t. However, it seemed he was safe for now.

“Thank you,” he said. Medea acknowledged him with a nod, before getting up to leave. She nodded to him and walked away, fading as she did so. However, she

uttered one last parting phrase in Welsh before fading entirely. Severus didn't understand it, but he wasn't entirely sure it was good. He was right.

"Sirius would have suited her better..."

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If Severus had thought that Medea's visit had ensured an easier life from then on, he had reckoned without his students and co-workers. In particular, two nemeses of old: Neville Longbottom and Remus Lupin.

It had started innocuously enough. During lunch, he'd noticed an awful lot of giggling, centred around the Gryffindor table mainly, but not absent from the others either. Most of the giggles started after someone had glanced at him, although a glare usually shut them up. However, as soon as his attention went elsewhere, the giggling would start up once more, usually worse than before. In some cases, it resulted in outright laughter.

It got worse as he patrolled the corridors after he'd eaten. Snatches of conversation drifted past his ears, although when he turned to see who was talking, they'd invariably shut up and move on.

"...clutching a handbag!" he heard Finnegan gasp to some Ravenclaw third years. "And wearing this ridiculous hat – you should have seen it..."

"Never laughed so much in all my life," Ron Weasley could be heard telling his sister. "Honestly, Gin, it was so funny, you should have been there. Harry nearly wet himself. Even Hermione laughed, and you know what she's like about that sort of thing."

Severus had had enough. He was determined to get to the bottom of this. He well knew the signs – the fact of people laughing at him behind his back was something he'd had plenty of in his school days. Damned if he was going to let it happen in adulthood too. Time to confront a few people.

He turned on the two young Weasleys, seeking answers. Accompanying them were Ginny's two friends, Lydia and Autumn, and a blonde Ravenclaw second year who was related to Marlene Lovegood in some way. He'd long ago given up trying to fathom out

that particular family tree – however, if one of its many members was hanging around with Slytherins, maybe he'd better start paying a little more attention. Filing this nugget away for future investigation, he advanced, bearing down on them with his cloak flowing behind him in the style especially designed for scaring small children.

It was Lydia who noticed him first. Nudging Ginny, she immediately grabbed the Ravenclaw and pushed her back, shielding the girl from Severus's wrath. Most intriguing. This new friendship would definitely merit further investigation. But not yet. Not before he'd got to the bottom of this latest mystery.

Ginny glanced up, eyes widening in horror as she saw her house head approaching. Discreetly, but sadly not discreetly enough, she kicked her brother in the shins, and when he looked at her angrily, nodded in Severus's direction. Ron turned with a frown, which quickly changed to utter panic on seeing the Potions master bearing down on him.

"And, what, I might ask, is going on here?" he said softly, looking from one face to the other in the hope that one might confess. One always did in the end. It was just a matter of time and finding the weak point. Right now, he suspected it would be Ronald Weasley, although the Ravenclaw might also succumb, given time. Giving the Weasley boy his full attention, he watched in satisfaction as the boy's mouth flapped up and down.

"Well?" he snapped. "I don't have all day. You five are clearly up to something and I want to know what. Are you going to talk, Weasley, or

are you going to stand there doing goldfish impersonations all afternoon?"

Autumn bit back a giggle. Severus chose to ignore her. The sound of people laughing at his pointed remarks was a laughter he could tolerate.

"Please, sir," said Ginny, looking nervously at him. "It was just some prank of Fred and George's he was telling us about. It, er, involved turning Neville Longbottom into, um..."

"A vulture," interrupted Lydia. "Great big vulture. At least, that's what Ron was telling us. Don't believe a word of it myself."

"Had the whole of Gryffindor in stitches apparently," Autumn volunteered.

Ron, ears a virulent shade of scarlet, nodded eagerly, relief all over his face. Severus was not convinced.

"I see. And this was apparently so amusing that Potter nearly lost control of his bladder? I somehow doubt it."

"Um, you kind of had to be there," said Ron weakly. Severus glared at him but decided not to persevere. Nothing short of Legilimens was going to get anything out of this lot.

"Were it not for the fact that it is well-known Gryffindors lack any appreciation of subtle humour, I would doubt your story, but as it is, it's just pitiful enough to be true. What does disappoint me is that four members of houses noted for their brilliant minds and ready wit and cunning were finding it similarly amusing." He fixed all of them with pointed stares. "Disperse immediately and get to your classes. And five points from Gryffindor for causing an obstruction in the corridor, Weasley!" he shouted at Ron's retreating back before striding in the direction of his classroom, cloak swirling behind him.

If he thought lunchtime had been bad, however, the afternoon's Potions lesson was worse. Normally it was a class he enjoyed teaching, consisting of the Slytherin fifth

years and most of his favourite students. On this particular afternoon, however, he entered the room to the sight of Fred Weasley standing in the middle of the class, the eager eyes of every student on him as he re-enacted some scene or other for their amusement. Halting just outside the door, he decided to wait and see if this would shed any light on proceedings.

“So out he comes, scowling and glowering like he does, you know, with the cloak flowing and everything,” here Fred paused his monologue for a worryingly accurate impersonation of Severus about to pounce on some unsuspecting first year, “and for a minute there, everyone freezes, wondering what the hell they’re doing. Longbottom’s white as a sheet, bloody terrified, poor kid, as would I be if I were in his shoes.”

“Not surprised,” he heard Rianne Stormosi observe. “He’s going to absolutely crucify Neville when he finds out about this.”

“It gets worse,” Fred grinned. “Anyway, it turns out Neville’s braver than we all thought, cause he actually manages to cast the charm, despite suddenly developing a stammer worse than Quirrell’s was.”

Laughter all round. Professor Quirrell, their very first Defence teacher, had been legendary for his inability to go more than two syllables without stammering. Of course, he was also legendary for throwing in his lot with Lord Voldemort and ending up getting killed by Caitlin Tyler, but that was another story. Snape listened intently for what had happened next.

“Anyhow, to cut a long story short, the charm works, and there he is, Professor Snape, Potions Master and Head of the charming and lovely Slytherin House...”

“Creep!” Angelina Johnson called out. Fred winked at her and resumed his story.

“Head of Slytherin House, standing there, with this massive great old lady’s handbag on his arm, and this huge hat with this flea-bitten vulture on top. This hat’s so big and top-heavy, it’s right down over his eyes, he can barely see a thing and he’s staggering around, hearing them all laughing but not able to do a bloody thing. So he’s crashing around, tripping over his robes, shouting, ‘Stop laughing! How dare you... mocking a teacher... Fifty points from Gryffind-argh!’” Fred began to do an impression of the false Snape staggering around, much to the amusement of the entire class, Slytherins included. Snape noted that even Luella Martin was finding it funny, whereas Deanna Tyler could barely stay on her stool for laughing. This ended. Now.

Opening the door fully, he strode in, heavy footfalls echoing around the dungeon walls. One by one, with the Slytherins noticing him first, the students fell silent, laughter dying, and all pairs of eyes but one finding something extremely interesting to look at in their textbooks, on the floor, carved on the desk, on the wall, in any direction in fact but that of Professor Snape. All except Fred Weasley, who, apparently oblivious to his teacher’s entrance, was merrily continuing his impersonation.

Nearby, a panic-stricken Marlie Lovegood coughed in a way that sounded rather like “Fred! Snape!”

Fred looked up at the sound, suddenly noticing that the room had gone strangely quiet.

“Hey, why’s everyone stopped laughing...” he began. This time it was George Weasley’s turn to cough.

“Behind you!”

Fred, eyes widening in horror as he realised what must have caused the sudden silence, slowly turned around. As he laid eyes on his stony-faced potions master, he laughed nervously and forced a smile.

“Er... hello, sir!” he managed bravely. “I was just amusing everyone with this untrue, made-up and entirely fictitious story that some of my housemates in a different year told me earlier, in which you are not involved in the slightest...” He trailed off under the professor’s silent glare.

“Detention, Weasley,” Snape hissed, trembling with a rage he was barely managing to hold inside. “And fifty points from Gryffindor for mocking a teacher.” His eyes left Fred as he spun round, glaring at the other students. For some reason, Marlie Lovegood caught his eye.

“And you, Lovegood,” he snarled at her. “Did I see you laughing as well?”

“No, sir!” the terrified girl squeaked. She caught the look he was giving her, and amended her answer to one a little more truthful, although not much. “Well, not really, sir, I was just being sociable, you know? Humouring him, like.” She smiled nervously at him.

“Fred’s not used to people laughing at his jokes, you see,” Rianne added by way of support.

Snape turned his glare on to her. “Quiet, Miss Stormosi,” he snapped. “I don’t recall asking for your opinion on the matter.” He turned back to Marlie, placing both hands on the desk in front of her and glaring furiously at her. “Well, Miss Lovegood? Care to acquaint me as to how and why Longbottom was casting charms on a fake version of me?”

Marlie whimpered, squirming in her seat. While she had no great affection for Neville Longbottom, quite the reverse could be said for Lupin, and she had no wish to see him face the Wrath of Snape. However, it didn’t look like she had much choice.

“Well, girl?” Snape demanded, striking the desk. “Answer me!”

“It was Professor Lupin,” Marlie whispered, eyes closed. “He- he was teaching the third year Gryffindors about Boggarts, and he had them trying the Riddikulus Charm out on one he’d found in Filch’s cabinets. And- and it turned out that Neville Longbottom’s worst fear is you...” she faltered, shrinking back from the inevitable onslaught. It didn’t come. Slowly, she risked opening her eyes.

Snape was still looming over her, but his attention was now fixed on a point on the wall behind her. He had gone absolutely pale and rigid, and she could see his hands trembling. Marlie was absolutely certain that he was now more livid than she’d ever seen him.

“Um... sir?” she whispered.

Seeming not to have heard her, Snape slowly leaned backwards and looked around, noticing everyone staring at him.

“Well?” he roared. “What are you all staring at? Do you not have a lesson to attend and work to do? Get your books out and get cracking! This did not happen!” Striding back to the front of the classroom, he began assigning a potion for them to work on that day. Such was his mood that not one student stepped out of line for the whole lesson. However, Marlie Lovegood couldn’t stop thinking about what she’d just exposed Professor Lupin to.

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She needn’t have worried. Lupin was well used to Snape’s temper by this time. He was expecting an imminent explosion. He was not to be disappointed.

“Lupin!” Severus snarled as he strode in to the staff room. “What do you mean by this!”

“Mean by what, Severus?” Lupin asked, all innocence. Across the room, the other members of staff, who had all heard the story several times over by now, all edged into corners, trying to avoid attracting attention while at the same time desperate to hear what was happening.

“You know damn well what!” Severus hissed, striding over to the hapless werewolf and grabbing him by the front of his robes. “How dare you? Humiliate me... in front of those... children!” He spat the word at Lupin. “Is this what you think of as teamwork?” he sneered.

Lupin gazed coolly back at Severus. Do not lose it, he told himself. Severus will not hurt you, and besides, you are in the right. However, he was finding it not a little difficult to remember that under Severus’s livid black stare.

“Severus, I was merely providing some practical instruction in Defence Against the Dark Arts,” Lupin said in that soft, knowing voice of his. “Is it my fault that you turned out to be one of their worst fears?”

Severus growled at this, a wild feral sound that made Lupin wonder which one of them was supposed to have problems with the Beast. He hoped for everyone’s sake that Severus was never infected with lycanthropy – he had the potential to be a true monster.

“You... did not have to... subject me... to such ridicule!” Severus raged. “It is severely undermining my ability to teach!”

"I doubt that," said Lupin softly. Already tales of Severus's actions that afternoon were filtering back, and from what Lupin had heard, Snape was inspiring even more fear than normal, to his face at least. Behind his back was another story entirely, of course, but Lupin decided it was best not to mention that. He didn't think it would go down well.

"That's what you think," snapped Severus. "You didn't walk into a lesson to find Fred Weasley doing an impersonation of you!!"

Lupin bit back a smile, and the urge to ask whether it had been an accurate one or not. This was not made any easier by a soft laugh emanating from a corner of the staff room. Severus spun round to see who dared laugh at him and quell the miscreant. Lupin was rather surprised to see Minerva McGonagall of all people shrink away and pretend to be very interested in her tea all of a sudden. Ignoring her, Severus turned back to Lupin.

"Well?" Severus demanded. "What do you intend to do about it?"

"Do about it?" Lupin blinked. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Apologise to me?" Severus asked. "Punish Longbottom? Stop allowing your students to run riot in your lessons? Lecture them on showing proper respect to their teachers?"

Slowly, Lupin raised his eyes to meet those of Severus. Too long, Severus. This has gone unchecked for far too long. Deep inside, Lupin could feel the normally soporific Beast uncurling at the base of his spine, angry at the blatant unfairness of it all. In particular, it felt anger on behalf of poor young Neville, the traumatised young boy who wanted to please but had been so terrorised by his Potions teacher that it was fortunate he still had a spark of personality left. And if Neville feared Snape so badly, how many others were there? Lupin disliked bullying in all forms, and despite knowing Severus's past, he had no intention of allowing his former friend to continue the vicious circle. Something in Severus's demeanour seemed to give under Lupin's gaze as he began to realise that maybe he'd pushed his normally placid colleague too far.

"I see nothing wrong in allowing my students to practice their magical skills, Severus," he said softly. "I don't see anything wrong in helping the most vulnerable of them confront one of his worst fears. What I do

see as wrong is a young boy being so frightened of one of his teachers that it appears as his Boggart fear! What on earth do you do to the boy in your lessons, Severus??"

"How I teach my pupils is none of your business, Lupin!" Severus snarled at him. However, he no longer looked as certain of himself as he did, and Lupin was not slow in exploiting the weakness. Pushing his chair back, away from the other professor, he got to his feet, and glared haughtily at Severus.

"Then might I suggest in that case you also refrain from telling me how to teach mine!" Lupin snapped. "I have work to do, Severus. When your ego's recovered, you can come and talk to me about this rationally. Until then, good day!" Drawing

his cloak around him in a gesture worthy of Snape himself (not that the latter appreciated it), Lupin strode out.

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The Beast aroused, Lupin made straight for his office, barely acknowledging the greetings that various students shouted at him. Had he but known it, his popularity had shot up as word of the day's events had got around. However, right now he was too infuriated to care. He was having a hard time believing Albus's words that Severus Snape was a more than competent teacher who was respected by his pupils. Only by the Slytherins, Lupin suspected. While he couldn't not respect Albus's policy of hiring those who might struggle to get work elsewhere, he had to wonder if a line needed to be drawn somewhere. The man is

an absolute sociopath! he thought to himself as he pushed his office door open.

To his surprise, the room wasn't empty. As he stepped in, a blonde figure seated in front of his desk turned around and got to her feet, smiling nervously in greeting.

"Hi, Professor Lupin," Marlie said shyly.

Lupin started, stunned that she'd called on him of her own volition. "Hello yourself," he replied, not even realising that he'd started smiling back. "Please, sit down – you don't have to stand on ceremony for me." Taking a seat across from her, he leaned on the desk, secretly admiring the way her hair hung down either side of her face.

Almost guiltily, Marlie sat down again, biting her lip. Lupin frowned. This wasn't good. His favourite sun avatar was upset. He hoped it wasn't Snape who'd had this effect. If it turned out that Marlie Lovegood secretly felt the same way about her Potions teacher that Neville Longbottom did, Lupin would not be held responsible for his actions.

"Marlene?" he asked gently. "Is everything alright? You look worried."

"Are you alright?" she asked, her voice as tender as his own. "I mean, I heard about what happened with the third year lesson, and I was wondering if you'd spoken to Snape yet..."

Lupin smiled, the tension melting away. She was actually concerned about his wellbeing! This was uncharacteristic enough to give him hope. She clearly wasn't anything like as self-centred as he'd been told.

"I'm fine," he assured her. Leaning back in his own chair, he ran long fingers through his hair. "Yes, I have spoken to Professor Snape. And no, he was not particularly happy with the situation. One might go so far as to say he was a tad bit annoyed." Marlie giggled nervously at this. Clearly she could see that for the understatement it was. "However," Lupin continued with a grin, "we had a full and frank exchange of views, and I like to think I emerged the victor."

A burst of laughter from Marlie.

"You had a fight, didn't you?" she whispered.

Lupin sighed. "We didn't come to blows, but aside from that, I suppose you could say that yes, we had a fight. He was not pleased, although I'd expected that."

Marlie covered her mouth with a hand. "Are you in trouble?" she asked.

Lupin shook his head. "No, not really. Sever- I mean, Professor Snape is not happy with me, but that's nothing new. After all, as I said to him myself, I was merely providing practical instruction in defending oneself against a Dark creature. It is not my problem if Professor Snape terrorises his students so much that one of them is mortally afraid of him, is it now?"

Marlie laughed. "No, sir." However, she still looked afraid. Of who was debatable. Was she afraid for him... or afraid of her House Head? He decided to find out.

"Marlene," he began, "is everything alright? You shouldn't worry about me, you know. I'm fairly certain Albus will back me, you don't have to worry about me getting sacked."

Marlie shook her head. "I'm not! It's just that... oh, Professor! It was me!" she cried.

Lupin blinked, looking at her strangely. What on earth had she done? "You who did what?" he asked.

"It was me who told Snape what happened," Marlie whispered, staring at her hands. Not meeting his eyes, she launched into an explanation of how they'd been about to have Potions, and Fred Weasley had recreated the events of earlier that day for them, as he'd heard it from

Ron. How everyone, Slytherins included, had found it utterly hilarious... until Snape had walked in at the crucial moment.

Marlie looked up at this point, and was amazed at the odd expression on Lupin's face. It was a strange sort of grimace, as if he wanted to smile, but at the same time didn't want to. As if he was desperately trying not to laugh. His eyes looked up and met hers. It was too much. Marlie, her fears melting away, burst out laughing. Lupin's self-control couldn't withstand that as well and before long, he was laughing too. This went on for a good few minutes, before Marlie finally managed to get her giggles under control, and Lupin finally dried his eyes.

"Oh gods," was all Lupin could say. "No wonder he was so pi-annoyed," he hastily amended. "Bad enough to have the whole school knowing about you being seen in an old lady's outfit, but to see Fred Weasley demonstrating it, and in front of your own house too...!" He smiled weakly at Marlie. "Oh dear. I think he may have it in for me even more now. But you know what?"

"What?"

asked

Marlie.

"I don't care!" Lupin grinned. He leaned back, folding his arms behind his head, the Beast well and truly back in its month-long prison and his earlier bad mood banished. He regarded Marlie carefully. "But what I don't get is why you should feel responsible. If anyone is to blame, I would have thought it was Fred for not being a bit more careful about doing Snape impressions in the man's own classroom."

"That's not all, sir." Marlie took up the story again, and explained Snape's reaction, before going on to relate how he'd turned on her, forcing her to reveal exactly how it had all started. Lupin's eyes darkened as he listened, his good mood dissipating.

"That's why I came to see you!" Marlie finished, wringing her hands. "Professor, it was me who told him what happened. If it wasn't for me, he might never have traced it all back to you. We could have made something up; even Fred could have managed it. But no, I had to tell him the truth. I'm really sorry, sir! It's all my fault."

"Marlene!" Lupin gasped. He reached out and grasped her by the hand. "It is no such thing. Don't you even dare blame yourself for this. If not you, someone else would have told him. Marlene, it is not your fault!"

Marlie began to smile hesitantly. "Really?"

"Really." Lupin looked her over, concerned. "Marlene, tell me," he began. "Have you ever felt... afraid... of Professor Snape?"

"Afraid?" Marlie asked quizzically. "Afraid how?"

"Have you ever felt afraid he might harm you?" Lupin asked tenderly. "Or afraid of attending a lesson of his?"

Marlie frowned, casting her mind back over her previous experiences of Professor Snape. On the one hand, their relationship had never exactly been warm, and Marlie knew full well that he thought she was a ditzy blonde bimbo. Yet on the other, given that her Potions grades were uniformly awful and her practical skills likely to result in a serious accident one of these days, he'd been surprisingly patient with her. Compared to, say, the Weasley twins or Neville Longbottom, she'd got off lightly. She'd hardly ever seen him angry with her without good cause, at least not until today. Even today, she didn't really blame Snape for his behaviour, not totally. She wouldn't exactly have been happy in his position either. To cap it all, had he not spent most of her first year trying to devise a Sleeping Death antidote for her? He couldn't despise her that much.

"No, not really," Marlie shrugged. "Only when I've not done my homework." She flashed Lupin a grin. Lupin smiled back uneasily.

“Maybe he’s easier on Slytherins,” he said, as if to himself. “Marlene, does it worry you that one of your fellow students is so terrified of his professor as to see him when a Boggart appears?”

“Not when it’s Neville Longbottom,” Marlie laughed. “The kid’s a total wuss.” She noticed the frown on her teacher’s face and realised that perhaps that wasn’t quite the

reply he’d been after. “But, you know, Snape’s not so bad, really. He just doesn’t like stupid people, or weaklings. That’s why he’s so hard on everybody; he’s trying to get us to toughen up. No one’s going to do us any favours outside school, so why should he start now?”

“Really?” Lupin murmured. “The received wisdom I have is that he normally goes out of his way to favour your house.”

“That’s because nobody else does,” Marlie hit back. “Everyone else gets treated nicely precisely because they are not us. Snape’s philosophy is to be really hard on them to redress the balance. Whereas with us, he’s nice in order to remind us all that there are people out there who will think we’re worthwhile.”

“Do you really believe that?” Lupin asked, wounded. Marlie nodded.

“The evidence would seem to support it,” said Marlie coolly. She noticed the concern on his face, and hastily tried to reassure him. “But don’t worry. One of my friends is working on it.”

“I see.” Lupin did not look convinced. “You don’t think that maybe the reputation of your house would be improved if your House Head treated his students better?”

“Couldn’t say, sir,” said Marlie, adopting the poker face she normally reserved for inconvenient interrogations by adult authority figures. “I think if he ever was nice to any non-Slytherins, they’d drop dead from shock.”

Lupin did not laugh. “I think it sufficiently unlikely to be worth trying one of these days. Neville Longbottom for one might appreciate it.”

Marlie felt an uncharacteristic urge to defend Snape. “Listen, Professor,” she said firmly, folding her hands on the desk and looking him straight in the eye, “life is hard. Life is a bitch, if you’ll pardon my language. There are lots of people out there who won’t give a toss about you or your background, and who will be less than nice to you. Neville’s got to get used to that sooner or later. Are you really doing him a favour if you shield him from the nasty side of life?”

Lupin still looked concerned, but it now seemed to be directed not at Neville, but at her. Marlie began to wish she’d never started this.

“Maybe if he knew people cared about him now, he’d be better able to deal with the adult world later on?” Lupin said quietly.

Marlie didn’t answer. She was loath to admit that Lupin might just have a point. She was also remembering her own childhood in which she’d been largely pampered and adored... and which may have been largely responsible for her own ability to shrug the tougher things in life off like a cloak. She put the ability to good use and drew the conversation to a close.

“Has Professor Snape ever dosed Neville with a deadly potion that had him fighting for his life in the hospital wing for three months?” she asked coldly.

"I can't say that he has," Lupin murmured. Marlie nodded as she got to her feet.

"Then you'll forgive me if I don't feel all that sorry for him. Listen, Professor, it's been nice talking to you, but I have to go. One of the dehumidifiers in the common room has packed in and if I don't fix it soon, people's cloaks will start getting mildewed. You've got no idea what mould does to velvet. See you later, Professor." Without waiting for an answer, she turned and left with a smile and a wave. Lupin returned the wave with a sigh. A sweet girl she might be, but she was still a Slytherin to the core. Thoughtfully, he picked up his timetable and turned to his classes for the next day. As he'd thought: he did indeed have Marlie's class. Picking up his wand, he left to start searching the castle. He had the perfect plan for their lesson.

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Severus's mood had not improved by the time he returned to Caitlin's house. Caitlin, being on night duty that day and not due to start work until eight o'clock, was to be found on her sofa painting her nails, clad in a white towel dressing gown, feet in the air, inspecting her not-quite-dry toenails. She glanced up as the fire blazed up and Severus stormed out of her hearth with a face like thunder. This did not look good.

"Bad day?" she asked, trying to sound sympathetic. Severus didn't answer, merely growling, flinging his bag to the floor and making for the drinks cabinet.

"Very bad day," Caitlin corrected. "What have the little horrors been up to now?"

Severus spun round, glaring at her. "Why the hell did you tell Dumbledore to hire him??" he snarled. Caitlin rolled her eyes. No need to ask who 'he' was.

"Because he's a nice man, good with kids and knows his subject?" she suggested. "Anyway, I did not tell him to hire Lupin. I merely suggested him when Albus asked me and provided a character reference for him. Why, what's he done now?"

“He has humiliated me in front of the entire school!” Severus shrieked. “They’re all laughing at me, and I caught that idiot Fred Weasley impersonating me, if you please!” He sank down into a nearby chair, seething. “My reputation is ruined. Ruined!”

“Was it accurate?” Caitlin asked, biting back a grin.

“Was what accurate,” he muttered.

“The impersonation.” Severus uttered a strangled cry, glaring at her. Caitlin backed down.

“Sorry,” she apologised, unable to stop the grin breaking through. Severus scowled at her but did not say anything. “What happened?”

Sulking, Severus told her what happened, from the first sniggers at lunchtime, through to catching Fred Weasley in the act, and getting the full story off Marlie, before finishing with his confrontation of Lupin.

“When your ego’s recovered, come and talk to me about it rationally!” he mimicked with a sneer. “Can you credit the man?? Unbelievable! I mean, how dare he show me up in front of everyone, then act like I am in the wrong... what’s so funny?” Caitlin was looking at him slyly, biting her lip and grinning. As he said these words and caught her eyes, she shut her eyes and began to giggle uncontrollably.

“What? Stop laughing!” Severus ordered her. “It is not funny! Caitlin! I’m warning you!” Caitlin had abandoned giggling, thrown her head back and moved on to full-blown cackling.

“Sorry!” she gasped. “You’re right. It’s not funny in the slightest!” Laughter overcame her again as she sank back into her chair. Severus folded his arms, glaring at her.

“Caitlin!” he yelled at her. “You’re meant to be being sympathetic and supportive! Not laughing yourself to death!”

Still giggling, Caitlin dried her eyes, coughed and got her laughter under control.

“Sorry,” she whispered. “But you have to admit: it is bloody funny!” Sighing, she got up and hobbled over to him, positioning herself behind him and wrapping her arms around his shoulders. “Oh look, I didn’t mean to laugh at you. I know, I know, it’s embarrassing. But give it a week or two and they’ll all have found something else to laugh at. You know how fickle kids are. And I’m sure you won’t have any problems in class – you’re still scary enough for them to shut up when you’re there.”

“And what about when I’m not? Caitlin, they’re going to be talking about this behind my back all year!” Severus argued. Caitlin shrugged.

“So? You won’t be there to hear it.”

“I know,” he muttered. “I have to imagine what they’re saying, and that, Caitlin, is worse.”

Caitlin smiled, resting her head against his. “Oh Severus. They’ll all find other things to talk about soon, I’m sure. Severus, believe it or not, you’re not the centre of the Hogwarts universe.” She heard him mutter something under his breath. “Quiet, egotist,” she told him playfully. “You’ll get over it.”

“Why me, Caitlin?” Severus complained, his anger abating as he reached for her. “Why, out of all the teachers at Hogwarts, did Lupin have to make a fool of me? Why couldn’t he have picked Hagrid, or McGonagall? People don’t like laughing at them, do they?”

“I don’t think he really had much choice about that,” said Caitlin. “After all, Neville’s not frightened of them, is he?” She gave his shoulder a squeeze.

“Maybe

Lupin has a point – perhaps you should be a little easier on them. They're only kids, after all. It's school, not boot camp."

Severus just snorted. "Really. Caitlin, there's a potential war in the making. These children, as you call them, could find themselves in the thick of it. You don't treat your Auror trainees gently just because they're young; am I doing the children a favour by letting them off lightly? Do you think the Dark Lord will be so merciful if he returns?"

"No," Caitlin admitted. "But all the same, I don't think we're in imminent danger of attack. Lighten up a little, Sevi." She perched on the arm of his chair and pulled him close, resting his head on her shoulder. Sighing, Severus slid his arms around her.

"You might have a point," Severus grumbled, still far from happy but prepared to put it behind him... for now. However, Neville Longbottom could look forward to the most miserable weeks of his life in the near future, and as for Remus Lupin... The werewolf had better watch his step. Things were about to get personal.

Chapter Twelve Fear Itself

The following day brought the lesson the Slytherins had been waiting for - their first with Professor Lupin. All four girls had been intensely curious ever since the incident on the train, but Neville Longbottom's experience with the Boggart had only served to increase matters. So it was that the entire class settled down immediately as soon as he walked in, nine faces watching him expectantly.

Lupin raised an eyebrow, surveying them in amused surprise.

"Well," he observed. "You do seem keen to learn, don't you? I am surprised - according to Professor McGonagall, most of you spent last

year doing your best to disrupt the lesson, that's when you bothered to turn up at all. Is it true you all walked out of lessons en masse one day and never returned?"

No one was quite sure what to say to that, although there was much grinning and exchanging of sly glances. Luella put her hand up.

"Sir, that's not quite true. I never walked out of classes," she pouted, looking for all the world like the only good girl in a nest of demons. Lupin didn't buy it.

"Yes, that's right, you'd been expelled the week before, hadn't you?" Lupin shot back with a grin. Next to her, Marlie hastily stifled a giggle, while Deanna burst out laughing. Lupin winked at Marlie before resuming his speech. "Yes, class, your exploits are the stuff of staff room legend, although I suspect some of my colleagues may have been exaggerating somewhat."

"Not by much," Rianne murmured, her eyes half-closed and an odd, dreamy look on her face, as if she was listening to something going on elsewhere. A second later, she

seemed to snap out of it and focused on Lupin once more. He looked at her oddly, but chose not to comment.

"Anyway," Lupin continued, "despite your reputation for doing what you want to do, and general lawlessness all round, you all seem to be intelligent young people, and in some cases, even gifted." He seemed to be looking at the four girls in particular as he said this. "In fact, I

would go so far as to say that you are amongst the best students in your year.”

“Not hard when the competition’s Fred and George Weasley, is it?” Deanna muttered, just a little too loudly, she realised as soon as the words had left her lips. Fortunately, Lupin didn’t seem to mind. In fact, he seemed to be suppressing a smile.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Deanna,” he told her. “The Gryffindor girls are all quite able, there’s some quite skilled Hufflepuffs too - stop sniggering, Lucas Vetinari, I don’t want to have to dock points in your first lesson - and the Ravenclaws are all very talented. However, in my opinion, there is not a single person in this room who does not have the potential to do well in this subject, and there are a few individuals who could dominate the entire field if they chose. Yes, class, this room has talent, and I think that your past behavioural difficulties are almost entirely due to the fact that your skills have been seriously underused. Tell me, is there one among you who seriously felt challenged last year? Yes, Miss Lovegood?”

“Well,” Marlie said, grinning slyly, “I don’t know about anyone else, but I had tremendous difficulty finding anything to rhyme with Gilderoy.”

Her classmates pounced on the opportunity, and soon everyone was contributing their difficulties with iambic pentameter and the rhyming structure of sonnets. Unable to bear it any longer, Lupin called a halt to things.

“Yes, yes, quite, I see your problems. Let me rephrase my question. Did any of you have any problems in this subject unrelated to the niceties of the English language?”

Silence. Lupin smiled, partly from relief at the sudden peace, and partly at the simple pleasure of having been right about them. This was going to be interesting.

“No, I thought not. Which is why I’m going to follow the hunch I had earlier, and introduce you to material I’d normally save for NEWT-level students.” Lupin took note of the little frisson of excitement that had gone around the room at those words. Not the fear and apprehension he might have thought he’d get, but pure, unadulterated excitement. They were ready.

“Now, as you might have heard already, I’m something of a specialist in magical creatures, and...” He found himself interrupted once more as the assembled Slytherins began to speculate on what he might have planned.

“Demons!” Deanna yelled.

“Vampires!”

Luella

guessed.

“A werewolf - you’ve captured a werewolf!” laughed Lucas. He didn’t catch the odd spasm on Lupin’s face... but Rianne did, a microsecond after her Sight had flashed a warning, and she’d remembered what silver veins in someone’s aura meant.

“Don’t be silly, Lucas, it’s not Full Moon for another three weeks yet,” she snapped. “A werewolf right now would be harmless.”

“Most observant, Rianne,” said Lupin, having recovered himself. “Actually, Deanna was right. Today, we’re engaging in a spot of demonology.”

“COOL!!” Deanna suddenly realised how her classmates were likely to react to that, and shrank back, embarrassed. Sure enough, the other Slytherins were all looking at her as if she was some kind of deranged lunatic, although Marlie and Rianne both seemed to be thinking ‘Typical!’

“Er... I meant ‘How interesting, that’ll be nice from a purely academic point of view’, of course,” she coughed.

Lupin gave her an understanding smile.

"I think we all knew what you meant, Deanna," he said gently. "Particularly Messieurs Lynch, Bryant and Foxworth, who, by the looks on their faces, appeared to have the exact same feelings you did." This had a strangely calming effect on the three boys in question who suddenly found something incredibly fascinating to look at on the ceiling, on the floor, on their desk, anywhere in fact, except in the eyes of either Professor Lupin or their classmates. Rianne began writing something on the edge of her parchment.

"Well, now at least we know who the class psychopaths are," she murmured to Marlie, who nodded in agreement.

Once the general hubbub had died down again, Lupin continued explaining what the lesson would involve.

"Today, we are going to look at one of the trickier varieties of demon - a Gachnar demon. Now, can anyone tell me what the unique features of this demon are?"

He looked around. Silence. No one appeared to know anything about a Gachnar demon, which was good. Exactly what Lupin had hoped for. Then Rianne raised her hand.

"Aren't they a kind of Fear Demon?"

"Well done, Rianne, five points to Slytherin. Can you, or anyone else, elaborate?"

Rianne thought for a moment. "Isn't it a bit like an uber-Boggart? Doesn't it manifest your worst fears, except on a grander scale?"

"Oh well done, you are well-informed. Five more points," said Lupin proudly. Rianne shot Deanna a cocky grin. Deanna just shook her head in amazement.

"And you had the nerve to call me warped," Deanna said quietly. However, Lupin was continuing, so she couldn't pursue the topic.

"Yes, as Rianne said, Gachnar demons are very similar to Boggarts in the way they operate. However, unlike Boggarts, who, as shapeshifters, actually transform physically into the fears of their victims, Gachnars work as perception-distorters instead. Now, who can tell me what a perception-distorter is, and how that would make it harder to fight than a Boggart?"

This time, to Lupin's surprise, it was Luella who raised her hand. "Yes, Luella?"

"They influence the way other people perceive things, so that the victim sees what the distorter wants them to see instead of what's really there. Glamoury, for example." This was said with a knowing smile, which worried Lupin a little. However, the answer was right enough.

"Well done, another five points. Now would anyone like to explain why that would make a Gachnar more dangerous than a Boggart? Yes, Deanna?"

"Because the traditional way to outwit a Boggart is to attack it in a group so it gets confused and doesn't know whose fear to mimic," Deanna replied thoughtfully. "However, a Gachnar doesn't actually change physically into your fear - it manipulates your perceptions instead. Which means that it can make more than one person experience their worst fear at the same time. Which means that going against it in a group won't help you. Instead of one person being scared out of their wits, you get five people all having nervous breakdowns."

"The best answer yet, ten points!" Lupin beamed. Clearly Caitlin had been training her daughter well. But would it be well enough for what he had in mind? "Yes, class, that is exactly why Gachnars are so dangerous - because it is very difficult indeed to summon up the strength of mind to fight it effectively. Indeed, not only does it cause each victim to experience their own fears, there is some evidence that

a Gachnar can create a composite nightmare out of the deepest fears of all who confront it. Hence they experience not just their own fears, but also those of their companions. This is why it is normally best to go in there alone - at least with your own fears alone, you know what you are up against. However, there is one good thing about Gachnars, and that is that they are very rare. In fact, they are not native to this dimension at all, but have to be summoned especially. This of course means that you are highly unlikely to ever encounter one normally unless you either plan to make demon summoning a hobby of yours, have one unleashed on you by an unscrupulous Dark mage or plan on joining the Aurors, in which case you may have to deal with them. In the last case, the Auror training programme contains specialist training on dealing with them, and in the first case, I'm hoping it will never apply to any of you. However, the second case is always a possibility, and besides, overcoming a Gachnar is an extremely psychologically beneficial experience. This year of all years, I believe overcoming your more negative emotions is paramount, and as a result, I've arranged for all of you to actually engage with a Gachnar yourselves."

Again, a little frisson of delight - however, this time, it was tempered with a level of apprehension that hadn't been there before. Deanna and Rianne in particular were

looking rather concerned. Evidently the prospect of facing their darker emotions was not something that appealed, not after the encounter with the Dementor on the train at any rate. Still, all the more reason for them to face a Gachnar. The lesson he had planned would teach them

far more than just getting rid of a pesky demon. Marlie's literal interpretation of his remark about facing one's personal demons had inspired him.

Telling them to gather up their things and follow him, Lupin led them to another room that he'd prepared earlier. It was an unused classroom, with another door on the other side leading into another room. This door was closed, with a rather large bar over it and various runes inscribed around it, which those who knew about such things instantly recognised as runes of binding and destruction. Even those who didn't took one look at the door and decided that they'd really rather not know what lay beyond it.

Lupin indicated for them to sit down, and took a seat at the teacher's table. Mounted on it was a Scryscope, which Lupin briefly consulted, before turning back to face them.

"Right, class," he said, his voice no longer light-hearted but deadly serious. "We are here. Behind that door, as you've probably already guessed, is the Gachnar. Now, given that going in as a group is not particularly effective, I'm going to send you in one at a time, so you can experience the Gachnar for yourselves. Now, don't worry," he raised a hand for silence as a series of anxious whispers had broken out, "the Gachnar cannot harm you, although it can cause fears to manifest physically. However, it can only work on the materials it has in the room - it cannot summon other people, things or beings in reality. It can only work on and change what you bring in to it. What you will see will frighten and disturb you, but it cannot really harm you. The only thing to be afraid of is fear itself." He surveyed them all, brilliant amber eyes gauging their reactions. They looked worried, but none of them outright terrified. That was good. He needed them tough enough to deal with it, but not reckless.

"Now, I shall be watching you via this Scryscope from here, and if anyone should get into any serious trouble, I will make arrangements to have you rescued. Yes, Marlene?"

"Sir, why can't you come in with us?" she asked, gazing at him hopefully. Lupin sighed. He was hoping that no one was going to ask that question. Still, now they had, and he supposed that he'd better answer it.

“Because, Marlene,” he said, fingering the bottle of emergency Wolfsbane potion in his pocket, “if my greatest fear manifested, whoever was in the same room as me would be in a lot more danger than anything their mind could come up with.”

Deanna shot a look at Marlie. “Not necessarily. You got over your Petrification experience yet? Don’t want the Slytherin Serpent appearing on us, do we now?”

“Eh, if it does, I’ll just shut my eyes and scream for Lu,” Marlie grinned.

Lupin blinked, wondering if this was such a good idea after all. Evidently Minerva’s account of last year’s heroics hadn’t been exaggerated after all. Still, it would make for interesting viewing, and if they could handle all that, they could handle anything.

“Now, in order to be fair, we shall do this alphabetically. Christopher, you’re first.”

Chris Bryant, muttering about how unfair being first all the time was, grabbed his wand and headed for the door. He reached it, paused, took a deep breath and went in. The seconds ticked by. Then, the door slammed open again and Chris staggered out, white and trembling.

“God,” he whispered. “That was so real!”

“What happened?” Geoff Foxworth asked him, fully aware that he was next and wanting to put it off for as long as possible.

“An accident at Dad’s factory,” Chris whispered. “Whole place burnt down. No survivors.” He hung his head. “Every time I go home, every

time he leaves in the morning, every time I get an owl from home, I worry, just in case something does happen. They make fireworks, for god's sake, all it takes is one idiot to light up a cigarette where they shouldn't or for the electrics to go wrong..." Shaking, he sat down. "Good luck, Foxy," was all he said, turning away. Wide-eyed, Geoff Foxworth got up, and slowly made his way over to the door. Hesitantly, he opened the door and stepped inside.

It was rather longer before he emerged, looking truly shaken up. Lupin, who had been watching everything, went over to him and placed a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Are you alright?" he asked gently. Geoff nodded.

"Think so," he whispered.

"I know your parents, Geoffrey," Lupin told him. "I don't think they would react anything like as badly as you think."

Geoff didn't look convinced, however he seemed to have recovered a little, joining his friends again.

"What was it?" Winter Montague asked him.

"Mum and Dad," Geoff replied in a voice so soft the others could barely hear him. "They've always wanted me to join the family apothecary business, but I'm really not interested. I'd rather work on a dragon sanctuary. I went in there, and they'd found out and gone ballistic. It ended with Dad disowning me and throwing me out of the house, saying I was no longer fit to be a Foxworth."

"Mate, that sucks," Winter consoled him. "But Professor Lupin's right, they probably won't react anything like that badly. Not like you're the sole heir, or even the oldest, is it?"

Lupin meanwhile was scanning the register. This time, he seemed to hesitate before reading the next name.

“Marlene. It’s... it’s your turn.”

Marlie got up nonchalantly, heading for the door trying to look more confident than she felt.

“Good luck!” Deanna called out. Luella got up and followed her to the door.

“Remember, Marls,” Luella reminded her, “if it slithers, just give me a call and I’ll come in and sort it.”

“Will do,” Marlie grinned, before squeezing Luella’s hand. “See you soon, mate.” Opening the door, she walked in.

And stared around her in wonder. None other than her own dorm room. Not very frightening as nightmares went. However, there was something odd about the room. The fireplace was where it always had been. Rianne’s bed was in its usual place nearest the door, books, clothes and make-up arranged immaculately, every single item stacked neatly in piles and exactly parallel with the nearest edge. Luella’s bed opposite, in more ways than one, with clothes scattered everywhere, books in haphazard piles precariously balanced on top of each other, and the sheets in total disarray. Organisation was not the Redeemer’s strong point. Next to Luella’s bed, Deanna’s, tidy mainly because it was almost totally bereft of personal items. Her clothes were all away in the wardrobe, her books and school equipment hidden under the bed, her pyjamas tucked under the sheets and everything else in her trunk. About the only thing that indicated that the bed was ever occupied was the small photo of Deanna and Caitlin on the bedside table, and next to it, an alarm clock that had seen better days. That was all. Then there was her own bed... at least there should have been. Instead, all that was there was an empty space.

“What about me?” Marlie whispered, fingering her necklace. “Where’s my bed gone?”

Behind her, the door opened. Marlie spun round, clutching her wand, but it was only her dorm mates.

“Hi, girls,” Marlie smiled with relief. “Look, everything’s fine, no snakes or anything. No need to come in after me.”

All three of them ignored her, walking in and going about their usual business: Rianne carefully checking that her things were in the exact same position she’d left them in, Luella frantically throwing things around and alternately swearing that the house elves kept moving her things and accusing the other two of pinching her stuff before locating the very item she was looking for exactly where she’d thrown in that morning, while Deanna simply freshened up at the sink and stretched out on her bed to relax.

“People?” Marlie asked, wondering if they’d all gone deaf. “I’m over here?”

“Ri, you done that essay for McGonagall yet?” Deanna asked Rianne.

“Of course,” said Rianne, sitting cross-legged on her bed with a Divination text-book on her lap. “Why, did you want to borrow it?”

“No, I just had a bet on with Lu,” Deanna sighed. “Bugger it, Lu, you always win these things. Anyone would think you had the Sight, not her.”

“I know Rianne,” said Luella absently. “Talking of which, Ri, where is my hairbrush?”

“Under your pillow,” Rianne replied. “Where you stuffed it this morning.”

"I looked there already!" Luella protested.

"Look again, and with your eyes this time," Rianne answered tersely. Grumbling, Luella lifted her pillow up and noticed her hairbrush lying there. Embarrassed, she picked it up and began brushing her hair.

"I swear it was not there earlier," she muttered. Rolling her eyes, Rianne returned to her reading.

"Can we get her traded in for an organised room mate?" she asked Deanna. "One who doesn't leave underwear in the middle of the floor and her bed looking like someone's had a fight with it?"

Luella glanced up, eyes flashing with annoyance. "If it comes to trading in, I'd quite like room mates who aren't so bloody obsessive about their space! Who don't line their books up with a set-square every morning and freak out if they're a millimetre out of place by nightfall."

"What about me?" Marlie protested. "I don't do that! I'd never do that! I don't complain about your mess!" This was true - while Marlie was on the whole more organised than Luella, she still tended to bring more stuff to Hogwarts than the other three put together. What with all the cuddly toys, cosmetics, books, tools, spare parts, gadgets, Quidditch gear and extra robes, you were normally hard pressed to find Marlie's bed at times. Certainly she had no right to accuse anyone else of being messy.

Marlie's words seemed to fall on deaf ears. Once more, the other three ignored her.

"Quiet, you two," Deanna intervened. "Enough of the arguing, or I shall go and sleep in the common room." She paused, something else occurring to her. "You know, I sometimes wonder what it would have been like if there'd been four of us in here."

"There are four of us in here!" Marlie yelled. "I live here too!"

"The lack of space might have forced Luella to clear her stuff up occasionally?" Rianne suggested. Luella threw a pillow at her. It missed, and hit the books on Rianne bedside table, causing Rianne to shriek and start re-arranging everything. Luella watched with a smug grin.

"Of course," Luella purred, "it could be that the other room mate might have been even worse than me. Maybe she'd have monopolised the entire room and been totally unbearable. Maybe she'd have brought her entire house along with her and taken up all available space. All the stuff would have overflowed and taken over not just her space, but yours too. Think about that, Rianne!"

Rianne, and Deanna too, winced.

"But you're always telling me off for that, Ri," Marlie whispered.

"Maybe we're best off just the three of us, eh?" said Rianne delicately.

"No you're not!" Marlie cried. "You need me!"

"I think so," Deanna agreed. "I mean, we're all prefects too. Suppose the fourth girl wasn't a prefect? We wouldn't be able to discuss prefect stuff in here anymore, would we?"

"Tyler, you bitch," Marlie breathed, tears pricking at her eyes. "Don't you remember me at all??"

"You're probably right," said Luella, picking up a pile of clothes, looking around for somewhere to put them, glancing briefly at the wardrobe before deciding that the corner of the room would make a far better storage place. "We three make a pretty good team on our own anyway, don't we?" She got up with a smile and turned to face her friends. Returning the smile, Deanna and Rianne also got up, and the three of them embraced each other in a group hug.

"The Glamourer, Warrior and Seer," Deanna declared. "What more do we need?"

“Can’t think of anything,” said Luella.

“Nor me,” said Rianne. “Here’s to us: the Slytherin Three!”

“The Slytherin Three!” the other two chorused. Choking, Marlie turned away, unable to bear it anymore. Seeing the true door, the way back into the real world, Marlie flung it open, and stumbled through it, nearly blind through tears.

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Luella started as Marlie staggered out, tears rolling down her face. At the desk, Lupin also looked up, face etched with concern as Luella caught her friend and pulled her into a hug.

“Marls, what happened?” Luella asked, concerned. “Are you OK?” She recoiled, shocked, at the look of hate and fury in Marlie’s eyes. “Marls?” she whispered. “What is it?”

Marlie shook her head, looking away. “Nothing,” she snapped. Luella, not convinced, could only exchange helpless looks with Rianne and Deanna. Lupin approached them

from behind, raising a hand as if to put an arm around Marlie, before thinking better of it and stepping back.

“Marlene,” he said softly. At the sound of her name, Marlie turned around, staring unblinkingly into his eyes. “Do not blame them. A Gachnar does not show you truth, only what you most fear. Believe me, Marlene; what you saw there could never occur in a universe in which you’d attended Hogwarts from age eleven as normal. It can never

happen in this world.” He could tell she didn’t believe him, although she looked less hostile than she had. He decided to try a different tack. “Marlene”, he began, “do you remember what we talked about on the first morning of term? Do you remember what I told you about the sun and the stars?”

She frowned at first, then slowly enlightenment seemed to dawn, and a small smile appeared. Marlie nodded, and Lupin felt relief seep through him. She would be all right.

“It is still true,” he said gently. “Nothing has changed since. Do not be afraid. Like I said before, all you truly have to fear is your own fear and what it might drive you to.”

Understanding dawned in Marlie’s eyes. “I get it,” she said, smiling as she turned to Luella, giving the other girl a hug. “I love you lot,” Marlie heard herself saying.

“You daft, soppy thing, you,” said Luella gruffly. “Come on, let’s go and sit down. Join the others.”

“So what was that all about?” Deanna asked, confused. “What was it, Marls, mass death and destruction all round?”

Marlie shook her head. “Oh no,” she said dismissively. “Nothing as straightforward.” A pensive look appeared on her face. “Tyler,” she faltered, “what would it be like in the dorm without me around? If I’d never come to Hogwarts?”

“Quieter,” said Deanna immediately. “And a hell of a lot tidier.” Her tone softened as she saw the stricken look on Marlie’s face. “But a lot less interesting.” She raised an eyebrow, curious. “Why, is that what you saw? Hogwarts without you?” Marlie nodded.

“Well, you’ve got a hell of an imagination then, because I honestly can’t picture Hogwarts without you,” Deanna declared. “Marls, don’t worry! Twice now you’ve been stuck in the hospital wing unable to communicate, and both times, you have no idea what the dorm actually was like! It was dull, quiet, boring... and for me at least, really, really lonely.” She put an arm around Marlie’s shoulders and hugged the other girl. Marlie smiled a little. But only a little.

“But still tidier and more peaceful?” she asked sadly.

“Hell yeah,” Rianne interrupted. “In fact, those weeks with you Petrified and Lu expelled were the best of the year peace-wise. No arguments over people moving other people’s stuff, no one swearing as they tripped over things, no one pestering me as to where their stuff was. It was
heaven.”

“Rianne!” Deanna told her. “Behave. Ignore her, Marls, you know what she’s like.”

“Don’t I just,” Marlie replied, smiling properly now. She glanced up to see Alex Lynch returning, telling Lucas in quavering tones about how he’d found himself crippled and wheelchair-bound, unable to fly and unable to join either the Aurors or the Obliviators. “Hey, Lu,” Marlie noted. “Your go in the House of Horrors.”

Luella grimaced at this. “Oh gods, so it is. Right. Hold on, people. I shall be back very soon, and hopefully not too traumatised.” Taking a deep breath, and nodding to Professor Lupin, she walked in.

She was surprised to find herself in her own front hall, with the sun pouring in through the window. She hadn’t expected it to be something so close to home. She’d expected the Chamber of Secrets or something similar. But then again, she couldn’t recall having been scared of the Chamber lately, and she spent too much time in dungeons to be really anxious around them. A sense of foreboding began to creep over her as she looked around. Why here, of all places? In the one place she’d never expected to find danger. Luella began to have a horrible feeling about this. It was far too quiet for one thing. Where was everyone? No sound of her mother cooking in the

kitchen. No TV coming from the living room. No sound of anyone upstairs. Gripping her wand, Luella stepped forward and made for the front room, afraid of what she might see.

The sight that met her eyes confirmed her worst fears. The room was in total disarray, with furniture everywhere, the curtains hanging off their hooks, and for some reason, every electrical item in the place a smoking ruin. Worst of all, however, was the sight of her parents' bodies lying in the centre of the room, their faces transfixed in terror.

"No!!" Luella cried, going pale.

"Yes," said a gloating voice from the other end of the room. Luella looked up to see the hated face of Lucius Malfoy gloating at her from the far corner. "What?" he purred. "Didn't think we'd take the fight to your home? This is war, 'Redeemer'," he barked. "There are no safe havens unless you make them so. Sadly, the promised saviour of Slytherin couldn't save her own family."

Luella felt tears at the back of her eyeballs, but she was determined not to let him see how it had affected her. It's not real, she told herself. This can't be happening. Then it occurred to her; it wasn't real. Just a Gachnar-induced hallucination. None of this is real, and your parents are alive and well.

"Thanks for the warning," she said roughly. "I'll be sure to have my home guarded should Voldemort return."

"Insolent brat," Lucius snapped at her. "What makes you think I'll wait for the Dark Lord to return?"

At this Luella could only smile.

“Because you have wealth, power and a family,” she replied, her fear starting to ebb. “You’re too much of a coward to act without him. Not this openly anyway.”

“There’ll be no witnesses. I’ll never be found out,” Lucius snarled, raising his wand. “Avada-“

“Expelliarmus!” Luella yelled, smiling inwardly. She’d guessed what he was planning as soon he’d started to speak. That was the trouble with Dark wizards, as Deanna was fond of saying - they liked to talk about themselves far too much and invariably gave the game away. Whereas Caitlin, and Deanna too, rarely wasted time on talking when a well-placed hex would suffice.

Lucius hissed in fury, advancing on her with his fists balled.

“You’ll pay for that, girl!” he howled at her. However, without a wand, he wasn’t so frightening any more. In fact, Luella felt her fear fade away. And as it did, she detected a flickering around the edges of the room, a flickering which reminded Luella of nothing more than her own Glamour powers. She looked in Lucius’s eyes, and realised then what she had to do.

“Is that the best you can do, Gachnar?” she whispered, summoning one of the most powerful Glammers she’d ever created. “Time to turn the tables. You don’t scare me, demon! If my parents die, I’ll deal with it. Caitlin’ll look after me, and if not her, Severus will. I will have revenge.”

Once more, the scene flickered, this time more obviously than before. She was getting to it.

“They’ll all die!” Lucius yelled, his voice verging on panic. “Everyone you love, everyone you care about!” Luella sighed. Less and less convincing by the second.

“Don’t bother me with your petty illusions!” she snapped, in a fair imitation of Professor Snape at his most irritated. “There is nothing, do you hear me, nothing, that you can teach me about perception-distorting!” She concentrated harder, weaving an illusion of her own around Gachnar-Lucius. The sight and sound of Lucius Malfoy crouching and screaming as the Glamour took hold was one she found

most gratifying. She'd had no idea making someone else suffer could be so much fun. Part of her began to understand why Voldemort had won so many followers. But it was time to end this.

"I wonder what a Fear Demon's worst fear is," she mused. "Probably no one being scared of it!" She practically screamed the last words as she pulled the illusion tight around it. Demon-Lucius screamed in pain, sank to his knees and howled as the Glamour sank in, battled with the Gachnar's own power before finally overcoming it. The howl of pain mutated into a high-pitched wine, the illusion of her front room glowed in lurid colours, before everything built up to a feverish intensity of colour and noise. Then the entire scene imploded in a blaze of light that left Luella dazzled, before vanishing entirely.

Blinking as her eyes cleared, Luella looked around. Nothing. Just an empty store room, with nothing exceptional about it at all. Nothing, that is, apart from the magical seal engraved on a pane of glass that was hanging on the wall, a circle with Hebrew letters and runes around it, and something like a pentagram in the middle. She guessed that must have something to do with summoning and binding the Gachnar. However, she wasn't in the mood to find out. She could still sense the demon's presence in the room, lurking, and right now, she felt too exhausted to deal with it. It too was licking its wounds for now, but it would be back, she was sure. Time to get out of here. Turning, she made for the door.

“Hey, folks,” she grinned as she stepped back into the classroom. “I made it. What on earth were you lot on about, you had me believe that the Gachnar was in some way frightening and dangerous.”

This was met with stunned silence, before a tumult of raised voices broke out.

“But it was!”

“How come you’re not scared?”

“Professor Lupin, you said it was really powerful...!”

“It is,” said Lupin thoughtfully. “But evidently not as powerful as Luella here. Congratulations on besting a very powerful demon. Twenty points to Slytherin.”

Luella grinned smugly at her fellow Slytherins, whose expressions ranged from amazement to pride to intense jealousy. Until, that is, Lupin spoke again.

“You will also remain behind after the lesson ends; I’d like a word with you, if you please.” The jealous looks transformed into the same smug grins that a now crestfallen Luella had been wearing a second ago. Muttering, she took a seat next to Rianne.

“Great. Now what?” Luella moaned.

“Too bad,” Rianne murmured. “He knows how you defeated it. And how you knew so much about perception-distorters. Best to admit it later, he’ll know you’re lying otherwise. But don’t worry; it’ll be safe to tell him anything. He’s sound.” Most of the month, Rianne added mentally.

By this time, Winter Montague had gone in and re-emerged with a wild tale of a horde of flesh-eating zombies.

“Knew we shouldn’t have watched Dawn of the Dead at that last video evening,” Lucas murmured to Marlie. Thanks to Marlie’s efforts, the Slytherin Common Room now had a TV and video recorder, allowing regular video nights, each one pitched at a different year. However, actual live TV programmes were a more long-term project, as Muggle signals couldn’t get through the magical field. Still, Marlie was working on it.

Lupin glanced down the register, and smiled a little at the next name.

“Rianne Stormosi,” he announced with a rather sly grin. “Your turn. Let’s see what you See.”

Damn. It seemed that Lupin was fully aware that Luella wasn’t the only one with extra-magical abilities. Rianne cursed her mother mentally, while also wishing that being an open Seer had been the least of her crimes. Still, there was no time to think of that now. It was time to face her fears.

She entered the room warily, open to any sense of danger or fear. However, her Sight was not bothering her much, and she soon saw why.

The room was empty. Well, almost empty. On the far wall, Rianne could see the same seal that Luella had noted earlier, decorated with runes, Hebrew letters, Greek letters and sundry other signs and symbols. It was clearly intended for summoning the demon. It dawned on Rianne what had happened. The same Sight that meant she couldn’t see Glamours meant she also couldn’t see the illusions of the Gachnar. Which meant, Rianne realised, that she might also get to see the demon’s true form.

“You’ll end up just like her!” a high-pitched voice yelled at her. Rianne turned around to see what was speaking to her, and then she noticed it. The Gachnar. It wasn’t what she’d expected. And it didn’t look frightening. Rianne couldn’t help but grin.

“You will, you know!” it snapped peevishly at her. “You’ve got her powers and everything! You even look like her.”

“Really,” Rianne smirked. “Know that for a fact, do you?”

“It’s your fate, Seer!” the demon fumed, jumping up and down in anger. “Scry into the future and you’ll see!”

Rianne bit her lip, desperately trying not to laugh. The demon became even angrier, shaking its fist.

“Blood will out!” it howled in a tinny shriek. Rianne could hold it in no longer. She dissolved into laughter even as the demon screamed bitter prophecies of doom, its screeching drowned out by Rianne’s giggles even as it reached its peak. Shaking her head, Rianne turned for the door. She paused for one last attempt at making a witty remark, but the sight of the demon just sent her into further hysterics. Shutting her eyes and whispering “Margaret Thatcher naked on a cold day!” over and over again as an antidote to the giggles, she left the room.

The other Slytherins were surprised, to say the least, to see Rianne Stormosi emerge from the room shaking with laughter, close the door behind her, return to her seat and dissolve into giggles.

“Ri? What’s up?” Deanna asked in concern.

“Are you alright?” Lucas demanded, making his way over. Marlie just raised an eyebrow at Rianne.

“Always knew you were weird,” she commented.

“Maybe that’s her biggest fear,” observed Alex Lynch from the other side of the room. “Being seen to show her feelings.”

“Hardly,” Rianne snickered. “Gods, you should have seen it.”

Luella sat down next to her friend, starting to smile.

"You could see what it really looked like, couldn't you?" she murmured quietly. Rianne nodded, still fighting laughter.

"Put it this way, Lu," Rianne finally managed to get out, "when you see it, you'll wonder what all the fuss was about."

"Talking of fuss," interrupted Lupin with a grin, "it's young Deanna's turn. Deanna, if you please?"

Deanna immediately froze. Despite her earlier enthusiasm, she wasn't nearly as confident as she appeared. She began to wonder if Lupin would let her run back to the dorm and fetch her labrys, before remembering that she wasn't supposed to let any teachers know she had it. Gritting her teeth, she picked up her wand and advanced. Time to face this thing. After all, Rianne and Luella had faced it down and survived. Why not her?

Of course, it didn't help that Deanna had no particular supernatural powers beyond her normal witch skills, and her weapons training was only of use against things with physical bodies. As she was about to find out.

She opened the door and entered, and promptly came face to face with a vision from her nightmares. It was the picture from the front of the Daily Prophet that had announced Sirius Black's attack on her home. Except this time, Deanna was part of it. Various Ministry officials were around and crime scene tape was everywhere, but no one paid any attention as Deanna ducked underneath it and ventured inside, her heart pounding.

The door swung open as she approached it. The hallway seemed undisturbed, but Deanna knew that this didn't mean a thing. Nothing of note ever happened in the hallway. The door to the living room hung threateningly ajar. Steeling herself, Deanna approached it and stepped into the room.

Much like Luella's vision, the room was a total mess, worse even than usual. A fight had been going on here. However, unlike Luella's, there was no living person in this room. The attacker had been and gone, his work done. Lying motionless in the middle of the room, lifeless eyes

staring at the ceiling as if shocked that death could ever have dared to come for her, mane of golden hair cascading around her in deceptively

careless abandon, a crimson stain on her stomach surrounding the heirloom blade that pinned her to the floor, lay the still figure of Caitlin Tyler.

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The class looked up as Deanna ventured slowly out of the room. She looked shaken, and paler than even they had ever seen her.

“Deanna? What happened?” Luella asked, going to comfort her.

Deanna just shook her head and held on to Luella, resting her head against her friend’s shoulder.

“Mum,” she whispered. Understanding, Luella said nothing, just stroked her friend’s hair.

“She’s not dead yet, you know,” said Rianne quietly, from behind her.

“Not this time,” said Deanna, brushing away a tear from her eye. “But she won’t cheat the reaper for ever.”

Silence fell briefly after that, as Luella led Deanna away. Then, it was Lucas’s turn.

“Lucas Vetinari,” Lupin announced. Getting up, a swagger in his step, the last of the Slytherins got up and waltzed inside.

Lucas found himself in a lady’s bedroom, decked out with antique furniture and a dressing table covered in make-up. A large four-poster bed, with the curtains half-drawn, dominated the room. And from within,

he could hear the unmistakable sound of a woman having an orgasm. Of Rianne having an orgasm. Fury boiling up inside him, a protective shell to mask the heartbreak within, he strode forward and wrenched the curtains open.

Rianne turned round to face him, the lazy post-orgasmic grin that he knew so well peering out at him from behind heavy-lidded eyes.

“Hey, Lucas,” she murmured. “Did you want to join in? Sorry, dear, you missed the show. We’re both shagged out.” The hint of a smirk on her lips showed that the pun was fully intentional. Next to Rianne, her lover was nestled against her, clearly exhausted, head buried in Rianne’s shoulder.

“If that’s Lucas, tell him to bugger off,” a muffled voice could be heard to say. “I don’t do threesomes, and what I look like when I’m having sex is my own business and that of whoever I’m shagging.” A hand brushed back a mane of dark brown hair, and Lucas felt his blood freeze to the marrow as Luella’s cold grey eyes glared back at him. “Lucas, piss off, you’re spoiling the moment. Rianne’s decided she’d like to experiment with foreplay for a change, and the novel sensation of sex lasting more than five minutes.”

“Ooh, well said, Lu,” Rianne smirked. “And talking of ways in which you’re better, are you ready for another go yet?”

Luella smiled slyly. “Maybe. Persuade me.”

“Now I love a challenge,” Rianne breathed, leaning over Luella to kiss her. With a snap of her fingers, the curtains swished closed, leaving a seething Lucas physically and metaphorically out in the cold.

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The Slytherins were surprised, to say the least, when Lucas emerged looking, not afraid like everyone else had done, but absolutely livid.

“Lucas?” Rianne asked, getting up. “What’s up-?” She caught his eye and immediately backed down. Something in his eyes told her that this was something she’d be better off steering clear of.

“Nothing,” the boy snapped. “Just leave me alone.” Rianne turned away, stung. However, for the briefest of instants, anger equal to his flares in her eyes. There would certainly be a reckoning later. However, for now, she chose to leave him to his friends.

“Whoa, what did you see?” Alex grinned. “Must have been pretty bad.”

“Probably saw his mum shagging Snape,” Geoff joked, only for Lucas to turn on him.

“Shut up!” Lucas raged, raising his fist. The other boy shrank back.

“Gods, I was only joking!” he gasped. “Sorry!”

“Lucas!” Lupin’s voice was quiet, yet it had the effect of causing Lucas to back down immediately. “Sit down and control yourself, or you will lose all the points your classmates have worked so hard to gain this lesson.” Lucas slumped into a seat, eyes still murderous, but his violent tendencies apparently under control. Lupin nodded in approval. “Good. Now apologise to Geoffrey.”

“Sorry, Foxy,” Lucas muttered.

“Thank you. Geoffrey, say sorry to Lucas for being insensitive.”

“Sorry, mate.”

With apologies exchanged and the situation under control, Lupin decided it was time to move on.

“Right. With that little altercation over with, let us get back to the lesson. You have now all experienced fear for yourselves, with varying results. You now know how the Gachnar operates. Now. Does anyone here have any thoughts as to how it is

vanquished and why that method would work? Luella, you were successful against it. Do you want to tell the class how you did it?"

Luella was far from willing to tell everyone how she'd done it. However, there was no harm in glossing over things a little. Let them think it was all down to conventional means.

"Er... basically, I just told myself it wasn't real, all a hallucination. Because it is, really. If you keep telling yourself that, you start to believe it, and once you believe it, you're home free." She purposely left out the bit about weaving a Glamour around the demon so it began experiencing the same kind of hallucinations she had. She just hoped that it would be enough.

Lupin for his part looked a little sceptical, but he was prevented from pursuing the topic by Alex Lynch waving his hand in the air in a frantic 'please, sir, pick me!' way.

"Yes, Alex?"

"Isn't it really just like banishing a Boggart? I mean, you have to show it that you're not afraid, don't you? Would the Riddikulus charm work on it?"

All around the room, a buzz of conversation started up, mostly consisting of Slytherins asking themselves why on earth they hadn't thought of doing that. Deanna in particular was on the verge of getting up and heading in for another go.

Lupin quietened them all down. "Yes, Alex, it would indeed. Take five points for Slytherin. The Riddikulus charm will indeed work on it to a

certain extent. It will stop the hallucinations for a time and give you the opportunity to take more permanent measures. However, the demon will still be present, if weakened, and anyone in range will still feel a vague sense of unease. Nevertheless it's a good start. There's nothing a Fear Demon hates more than people not being afraid of it."

Luella couldn't help smiling at the knowledge that she'd been right about the Gachnar's weakness. Unfortunately, Lupin noticed her smiling and picked her out again.

"Had an idea on how to banish it permanently, Luella?"

Oh gods. Now she'd done it. Time for some quick thinking.

"Does it have something to do with that seal on the side of the room?"

Murmurs of 'Seal? What seal?' broke out all around her. Lupin stilled the murmuring and answered her.

"So you saw it then. Yes, Luella, that Seal is what calls the Gachnar and binds it to this plane. And that Seal is the key to destroying it. Now, there are all sorts of complex exorcism rites, but probably the most effective means of defeating it is to destroy the Seal."

"Destroy the Seal, right," said Deanna thoughtfully. "OK. That banishes it back to where it came from, does it?"

"Oh no," said Lupin with a grin. "It summons the demon's physical form. Once that is done, the demon can be killed by conventional means, usually involving bladed weapons."

It was strange how the entire class went quiet as he said this. All except Rianne, who was grinning, and Deanna, who just looked very thoughtful. Bladed weapons were something she could deal with.

“Right you are, sir,” she said, getting to her feet. “Can I just nip back to my dorm? It’s just that there’s something there that might come in handy. I won’t be long.”

She was prevented from leaving by Rianne, who grabbed at her sleeve.

“Leave it, Tyler. You’ll be OK without it. Just make sure you have a big, thick book handy.”

Deanna raised an eyebrow, but said no more. Instead, she simply turned back to Lupin.

“OK. So now what? All troop inside and kill the thing?”

Lupin shrugged. “Up to you. See it as a guided practical assignment. Get together and work something out. I’m sure you’re capable.”

As one, the Slytherins turned to Deanna, all except Deanna herself, who was staring intently at Rianne.

“Well, Stormer?” Deanna breathed. “Gonna come through for us?”

Rianne smiled. “Oh, alright then,” she said lazily. “Gather round, folks, I have an idea.”

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“Why do we volunteer for these things?” one of the boys could clearly be heard muttering. Unfortunately Rianne heard him.

“Look, your part is easy!” she snapped, turning on the unfortunate Alex Lynch. “All you have to do is sing! The three of us will be doing the difficult bit.” She indicated Deanna and Luella on either side of her. “Now come on, let’s get it over with. Does everybody know what we’re going to do?”

They all chorused yes. It was a simple plan as plans went. They would all enter the room, and Luella would distract the demon with a few well-placed charms and, unbeknown to the boys, a healthy dose of Glamour too. Meanwhile everyone else would link arms and start singing “We Are The Champions” while thinking of Slytherin’s last Quidditch victory. Rianne would then fire a Shattering Charm at the

Gachnar's Seal, ending the illusions and summoning the demon. It would then be

down to Deanna to kill it, with assistance from the others if needed. For some reason, which she wouldn't disclose to the others, Rianne didn't seem to think that would be necessary.

"Just trust me," she reassured Deanna. Deanna for her part was inclined to do the exact opposite, however she'd seen Rianne emerge nearly cracking up. Evidently it wasn't so frightening in real life. Gathering her wits, she linked arms with Luella and Rianne, and prepared to enter.

As Lupin had said, the scenery began to change for all of them. The Slytherins found themselves standing in the burnt out remains of a factory. In the middle of it all was a table laid for tea, with two mages seated at it who could only be Geoff Foxworth's furious parents, while in front of the table were the lifeless bodies of Caitlin Tyler and Luella's parents, with Lucius Malfoy and Sirius Black leaning over them, both leering at the daughters of the ones they'd killed. In a far corner was a four-poster bed with the curtains drawn and girlish laughter emanating from within, which no one but Lucas really got, and in the background were the silhouettes of a shuffling army of zombies, at the sight of which Winter nearly turned and ran.

Lucas and Marlie instinctively reached to grab him. However, while Lucas was able to seize his arm and stop him bolting, Marlie saw her hand go straight through him. She shrieked, but no one heard her.

“Winter, for gods’ sakes, stay calm. We can fight this!” Lucas yelled at him. Then Geoff shouted to them.

“Lucas, look at Alex!”

Alex was seated in a Muggle wheelchair, arms and legs flopping, and his head leaning to one side, crippled. Marlie grimaced at the sight. She’d never been comfortable with the concept of disability. It was a reminder that she might not always be the Slytherin Sex Kitten and Quidditch Goddess, might one day end up weak and dependent herself. It wasn’t a concept she liked to entertain. But it had never been her worst fear.

“Hey, where’d Marls go?” Winter suddenly cried. “Marls?? Marls?”

“I’m right here!” snapped Marlie, her fear starting to get the better of her. “Guys?? I’m over here!”

No one seemed to hear her. Instead the Slytherin boys began calling out her name, all looking everywhere but at where Marlie was standing. Panicking, Marlie turned to her three friends.

“Help me!” she screamed.

Now Marlie could scream very loudly when she wanted to. The three girls all put their hands over their ears and turned to see where the noise had come from. To Marlie’s despair, Deanna and Luella both look straight through her. Rianne, however, to Marlie’s delight, looked straight into her eyes.

“What??” she snapped. She noticed the boys panicking. “Oh for god’s sake,” she sighed, rolling her eyes before gathering her strength for a shout as loud as Marlie’s had been.

“I DON’T HEAR YOU SINGING!!” she thundered. That stopped them. As one, they turned to look at Rianne, all looking rather sheepish. Rianne pointed at them all in turn.

“Winter, stop panicking,” she ordered. “Geoff, stop fretting - Alex is fine. Marlie, please stop screaming - you are not invisible, I can see you perfectly. All of you, stop running around like headless chickens! We have more important things to do? Now sing, you buggers!” She turned to Luella. “Lu, do the mojo.”

Luella concentrated, gestured in front of her and began to whisper under her breath. The visions flickered. Alex’s wheelchair vanished, and Alex was standing, perfectly healthy.

The Slytherins, apparently recovered, linked arms. To her relief, Marlie found that she could touch her classmates again. As one, they began to sing, loudly, tunelessly, but nevertheless, singing. In front of them, Luella began to grin, raised her hands and appeared to be physically pushing the demon back. Before her, the figures of Lucius Malfoy and Sirius Black began to back off. However, they weren’t backing off far, and Lucius in particular seemed to be rallying. A battle of wills began, as perception distorter faced off against perception distorter, and rival illusions flickered around the room. For one moment, the Gachnar hallucinations faded entirely, before snapping back with a vengeance. Marlie felt her fingers start to melt into Geoff and Winter’s arms, as Geoff stared at her in shock.

“Marls?” he gasped. “You’re fading!”

Marlie knew what that meant. Luella was tiring. Not good. Taking a deep breath, she prepared for her loudest scream yet.

“Rianne!!”

Rianne turned around, glaring. Marlie shrank back. Rianne looked absolutely terrifying, with a madness in her eyes that simply whispered ‘Dark witch’. Marlie realised then whose fear hadn’t been represented earlier. That was what Rianne feared - taking after her mother. This did not bode well.

“The Seal!” she shouted. “Break it! Can’t you see Lu’s nearly done in?”

“I see,” said Rianne calmly. She lifted her wand, but didn’t aim it at the wall. She pointed it at Marlie, a sickening grin on her face. “I’m just waiting for her to break entirely.”

Marlie froze. It seemed that the collective fear of eight other people had done what Rianne’s alone had not - overridden her Sight with a greater power. Rianne had turned into her mother’s daughter. At that moment, the flesh-eating zombies reached the

dinner table and started ripping the Foxworths apart. Deanna started frantically blasting them with Fire Charms.

“Rianne!” Deanna shouted. “Are you breaking this bloody Seal or what?”

“Nah,” Rianne replied. “Shooting kittens is more fun.” Lifting her wand at Marlie, she cast the Killing Curse. In that instant, several things happened at once. Shrieking, Marlie threw herself to the floor, Geoff and Winter clapping their hands to their ears and backing away. Luella’s strength failed her as she sank to her knees, exhausted by the effort. Stepping forward with glee, Lucius grabbed her robes and aimed his wand at her, preparing to strike. Meanwhile, Rianne’s curse sailed over Marlie’s head and struck the wall. Now, it is an interesting property of the Killing Curse, that if the first thing it hits isn’t a living thing, it will rebound, not always at an angle you would expect, and keep rebounding until it does hit something living. This is one reason why it isn’t widely used, even by Dark mages. Rianne’s hex was no

exception. It hit the back wall, bounced off it, hit the ceiling, and ricocheted downwards towards Luella. At that exact moment, Lucius leaned over her, a malicious grin on his face. It was his last act. The curse hit him in the back of the head. Freezing, he collapsed to the ground, crushing Luella beneath him. Too exhausted to push him away, Luella collapsed to the floor, watched in horror by Deanna. With the demon's power short-circuited, the illusions faded. For one brief moment, the Seal appeared, visible on the far wall. Glancing up from the floor, it was Marlie who saw it.

"Tyler!" she gasped, pointing at it. "There!"

Turning, Deanna saw it, and lifted her wand, letting off a Shattering Charm. A loud crack and the sound of lots of little pieces of glass tinkling to the floor echoed around the room, loud in the sudden silence. The illusions vanished as if someone had flicked a switch. Marlie picked herself up and dusted her robes off, glaring at Rianne. Rianne meanwhile was staring at her hands in horror.

"I didn't do that... did I?" she whispered, before looking back at Marlie. "Marls... gods, I'm so sorry! I don't know... what happened?"

"You couldn't see your fear... but we all could," said Luella, now sitting up. She looked truly worn out. "Hope no one wants me to do any practical magic this afternoon." She rested her head on her knees, her power spent. Deanna went over to her, resting an arm around her.

"It's alright," she said softly. "It's over. We're gonna be alright."

"Not quite," Lucas cut in tersely. "Tyler, you still have a physical demon to get rid of."

"Yeah, that's a point," Marlie chirped up. "Where is it? I don't see a big scary horned thing anywhere."

Everyone looked around. Sure enough, there was no demon in sight. This was either very good... or very bad. What was it up to now?

Then Luella turned around and saw it. Still being on the ground, she was looking lower down than the others. She blinked. Then she began to giggle.

"Is that it?" she laughed. "Oh... my... god." Giggling, she collapsed on to the floor, well and truly hysterical, with the kind of laugh that sounded like it might turn into tears at any minute. The Gachnar was only six inches tall.

"I'll kill your parents then you!" it raged, in a high-pitched squeak that sounded as if it was on helium. Muffled laughter came from behind Luella. It seemed she wasn't the only one feeling light-headed.

"That was what we were afraid of?" Lucas demanded, furious. "That little thing?"

"Yes," said Professor Lupin from the doorway. "That little thing caused all the trouble. It's strange how something so puny and insignificant can cause so much trouble. Isn't it?" He seemed to be looking at Rianne in particular as he said this.

"Why didn't you stop me?" Rianne whispered. "I could have killed someone." She did not meet Marlie's eyes.

"Then your fear is not dissimilar to mine," said Lupin levelly. "Believe me, you had enough to deal with without adding my worst fear to the mix." He surveyed them all, smiling at them with pride. "And yet you managed it. Well done. All of you. Yes, even those who were planning to turn and run. None of you did, despite the danger. You can hold your heads up with pride - you match the Gryffindors in bravery. Assuming that sort of thing matters to you, of course." Despite doing their best to hide their pleasure, most of the Slytherins were smiling.

"Maybe," Deanna admitted.

"Maybe yes or maybe no?" asked Lupin with a grin. "Of course, if none of you want twenty points each for Slytherin..."

"We're happy!" Luella yelled. The effects of Glamoury overload had yet to wear off, and consequently, she was experiencing a high not dissimilar to certain Muggle intoxicants. The effect seemed to be catching, as the other Slytherins abandoned cool and enthusiastically agreed with her.

"Capital idea, sir!"

"We're very proud of ourselves!"

"Sir, that is a fabulous haircut, where can I get one like it..."

Lupin, smirking, raised his hands for silence. "Twenty points each. And thank you for the compliment, Lucas, but I should warn you that flattery will get you nowhere. Now, what have we learnt from this experience. Marlie?"

"When Rianne's eyes go all black and weird like that, run like hell."

"That zombies, contrary to popular belief, are flammable," Deanna added.

"Never let Martin exhaust her powers, she's going to be a total pain all day now," said Lucas, rolling his eyes.

"That 'fear is the mind-killer' is more than just a cool proverb." Rianne's voice cut through the general hilarity, bringing even Luella down from the post-near-death high. "What you fear can hurt you far more than any reality."

“Ten more points,” said Lupin. “That is exactly what I wanted you all to learn. Fear itself is the smallest, most puny thing... but your own mind can build it up into the deadliest thing you can imagine, for the precise reason that your own imagination is what fuels it. Never forget that. Reality is virtually never as bad as what your mind can come up with. Your body and instincts will handle reality quite well if you let them. It is fear that will stop you letting them. And talking of fear...” He turned to Deanna. “The Gachnar is still squeaking. Finish the job, will you?”

Nodding, Deanna picked up the textbook that she’d brought in on Rianne’s advice and approached the Gachnar.

“She won’t live forever, you know!” it squeaked at her. “One day you’ll come home to find Melissa waiting for you with the news!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Deanna yawned. “Heard it all before.” She dropped the book as if crushing a fly. The demon squeaked its last and then was no more.

“You know, I always thought that killing my first demon would be trickier,” Deanna commented. She picked the book up, grimaced at the squashed demon coating it, and hastily cleaned it with a few charms. “You know, axes and magical swords, and demon blood all over me, and the like.”

“Be grateful,” Rianne told her, having almost recovered from going Dark. “It’s a bugger to get out of your robes.”

“Yeah, and you’d know, would you?” She looked at Rianne, remembering seeing her go evil. “Actually, don’t answer that one. Let’s just go.”

The class broke up after that, with everyone gathering their books and preparing to leave. Alex had worked out that they’d got one hundred and eighty points from the battle alone, never mind all the points gained from answering questions. Oddly enough, this had the effect of wiping out any lingering resentment from Lupin over nearly getting them killed, and the Slytherins filed out in jubilation. Luella, supported by Deanna and Marlie, stopped by Lupin’s desk.

“Did you want to see me after class?” she asked wearily, the high now wearing off. Lupin looked the exhausted teenager over, deciding that

he wasn't going to get much in the way of coherence out of her at the moment.

"Maybe another time. Go on, go to lunch, you deserve it."

Smiling gratefully, Luella staggered out on her friends' shoulders, Rianne trailing behind. Until Lupin stopped her.

"I'd quite like a word with you though, Rianne."

Shrugging, Rianne nodded her friends on, closing the door before turning back to Lupin.

"Sir? Am I in trouble? Because I had no idea I was trying to kill Marlie until I'd done it, I swear," Rianne began. Lupin brushed aside her worries.

"No, no. That sort of thing happens quite a bit when a Seer faces a Gachnar. They don't see their own fear, but anyone else in the vicinity does. I just wish I'd known how lethal yours was beforehand. But then, as I told you before, I'm hardly one to talk."

Rianne recalled her flash of Sight earlier. "Yes, I suppose having a raving werewolf on the loose in addition to dark witches, zombies and all the rest would have been a bit too much." She narrowed her eyes. "I assume arrangements have been made to accommodate your, er, problem?"

Lupin reached into his pocket and produced the vial of Wolfsbane. "Yes. Your house head has made this for me. It will keep the Beast

under control. I am safe as long as I take it on time. You need not fear me."

"I don't fear you attacking me," said Rianne shortly. "I see the way you look at Marlie. For your own safety and hers, keep your distance, OK?"

Lupin's face went blank. "Thank you for the warning," he said, wondering just how much Rianne's Sight was telling her. "I have one for you too. Be careful of your boyfriend. I saw his fear, and it involved you. Beware his inner rage, and whatever you do, give him no reason to be jealous. He is no lycan, but he too has a potentially lethal Beast in his heart. Do not let it turn its attention to you."

Rianne did not react. "I'll keep that in mind. We understand each other then." She turned to go, but at the door, she turned back, one last question.

"Sir," she began, "is Remus Lupin your real name? Because if it is, your parents were either Seers or had no sense of fate."

Lupin laughed at that, shattering the tension.

"No," he smiled. "My family disowned me after I got infected. Remus Lupin is an alias I adopted, well, the Lupin bit is anyway. Remus is my real first name."

"There a Romulus anywhere?"

"Actually, yes. But he doesn't use his birth name anymore either, first name or surname. Carrying our birth surname implies certain connections and carries certain obligations that neither of us wished to have to honour."

“Intriguing,” Rianne purred. “Not only a werewolf, but an ex-member of a pureblood vassal family too. We do get them at this school, don’t we? Well, be seeing you. Don’t forget my warning - if Marlie gets hurt...” She didn’t finish the sentence. The grin, eerily reminiscent of the Dark witch grin she’d worn in the Gachnar illusions, did that for her.

Lucas was waiting for her as she left the room. His earlier bad mood had vanished and he looked rather pleased. Being two hundred and fifty points clear in the House Championship did that to a man.

“Well, cara mia?” he murmured, sliding an arm around Rianne’s waist. “Was he terribly cross with you? Turning into a dark witch like that, honestly. You’ll get a reputation at this rate.” He paused, before correcting himself. “A worse reputation, anyway.”

“Stop it.” Rianne nudged him. “We just exchanged a few words on the lesson, and that was all. Hardly my fault I have a potentially lethal fear, is it? And speaking of which, what was yours? You never did say.”

Lucas’s face darkened for an instant, before he forced it back and smiled his usual charming smile.

“Ah, it’s nothing. In fact, in the broad light of day, it’s barely worth bothering about. Come on, let’s go to lunch. Put it all behind us.” He offered her his arm, and she took it, following him to the Great Hall. However, although her Sight wasn’t giving anything away, Lupin’s warning had hit home, and she had the uneasy sensation that Lucas Vetinari’s deepest fear wasn’t anything like as insignificant as he made out.

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Chapter 13 Everything She Touches Changes

As expected, the Serpents' Nest was dominated that night by the story of Professor Lupin's lesson, and how they'd defeated the Gachnar. Needless to say, the entire room was transfixed, and even Draco Malfoy had to admit that Lupin knew his stuff.

"Even if he is summoning demons," he added. "Honestly, Rianne, does Dumbledore know about all this? Someone could have died."

"Yeah, but no one did," Marlie interrupted, feeling compelled to defend Lupin. "And it was a fantastic lesson!"

"There aren't many lessons where you get to fight off zombies, dodge lethal hexes and kill demons," said Lucas, as if Marlie hadn't spoken. "I mean, you should have seen Rianne, Deanna and Luella. They were amazing!"

"It was nothing," said Deanna modestly. "Lu did the real work, didn't you?" She put her arm around Luella, who was still looking knackered and had spent the afternoon in the hospital wing recovering.

"Tell me about it," Luella murmured, nestled up next to Deanna with her eyes shut. "Next time I'm leaving you lot to cope without me."

"Oh, you don't mean that!" Deanna pouted, fluttering her eyelashes at her. "Where would we be without you?"

Luella just grinned and chuckled. "Dead, probably." She nudged Rianne, on her other side. "Continue the story. I want to hear the end."

"You know the end!" Rianne sighed. But she got on with the tale anyway, telling everyone what had happened, including how, when all nine of them had gone in, the combined fear had made all the illusions far more powerful. Unlike in her solo outing, Rianne had been able to see neither demon nor Seal, instead going into a kind of trance and only snapping out of it when Deanna had broken the Seal and shattered the demon's power with it.

Of course, that prompted a whole new round of questions, and pretty soon everyone was talking over each other, all eager to get their own

version of events across. Everyone, that is, apart from Marlie. She was sitting off to one side, feeling rather superfluous.

It was stupid, she knew. Lupin and Deanna had both reassured her that she could never be ignored or forgotten. And yet she couldn't help feeling left out. It had not escaped her notice that her own part in the defeat of the Gachnar had been minimal to say the least, being relegated to the supporting cast while her three friends had been out front. Deanna's words from her own illusion, fictional though they had been, came back to her.

"The Warrior, the Glamourer and the Seer! What more do we need?"

What indeed. All Marlie had to offer in the way of special gifts were her technical skills, ability to grab the Snitch out of the sky while hanging upside down from a speeding broom and an unerring instinct for distinguishing ordinary clothes from designer ones at a distance. Somehow, she doubted she'd be called on to fix a dehumidifier or spot fake Versace in a combat situation. She needed a magical skill, a unique supernatural ability equal to Luella's Glamoury, or Rianne's Sight, or Deanna's combat skills. Getting to her feet, she slipped quietly away.

"Deanna, I'm feeling tired, so I'll head back to the dorm, OK?"

"Uh-huh," said Deanna vaguely, listening to Rianne and Geoff try and pry Lucas's fear out of him, without success. Luella didn't speak, simply waving in Marlie's direction, although to be fair, she was exhausted. Rianne didn't even notice Marlie was going. Her fears confirmed, Marlie left. If they didn't think they needed her, it was time to prove otherwise.

She locked the door behind her as she entered the dorm - this was one occasion she did not want to be disturbed. Sitting cross-legged on the bed, after having dug out one of the books that Draco had bribed his way back into her favour with, she called her cat, Snowy, over to her.

"Snowy! Snowy-kins! Come to mummy!"

True to form, the cat emerged from under Rianne's bed where he had been busily engaged in stalking one of her slippers, ran over to Marlie and leapt into her lap, purring as he burrowed into her robes, lying on his back and swatting at her hair as it dangled down towards the cat's waiting paws.

Marlie tickled Snowy under his chin, smiling indulgently. She'd always liked cats, and Snowy was in her opinion a particularly fine specimen. This opinion had been confirmed when the first thing she'd seen in her Sleeping Death trance had been the unmistakable figure of the fluffy white cat, bearing her wand in his mouth. However, quite apart from his loyalty, Snowy had another virtue, and that was the ability to shed hair, and lots of it. It was a vital quality for what Marlie had in mind. Rolling back her sleeves, she fingered the bracelets on her wrists, composed entirely of cat hair culled from five years of daily grooming. There was a similar pair on her ankles, some fur in her shoes, and she'd lined her school robes with the stuff too. She'd spent as much time following the cat as she could spare, and many sessions imitating the cat, or simply meditating on him. This had been backed up with a lot of studying on the topic of domestic cats, all masked by the desire to look after her beloved pet. Marlie's intention by now should have been obvious. She was trying to become a cat Animaga.

It had been an ambition of hers for years, of course, ever since that first lesson in Transfiguration. Since then, she'd applied herself ferociously to the task, paying scrupulous attention during lessons, reading every textbook she could get her hands on, even roping her Clearwater cousins in as assistants. She'd entered trances, carried out bizarre telepathic and astral projection experiments with Snowy, even got her cousins to hunt in the Restricted Section for her, courtesy of Gilderoy Lockhart. Then, over the summer had come the breakthrough.

All that time in America with her cousins on hand, and no one to check up on them magically, then a gift from the gods, or rather, the Malfoys, as Draco had wormed his way back into her house with books dealing with the very topic. Fortuitous indeed from Marlie's point of view, although had she been aware of Narcissa's interest in her, perhaps not as coincidental as she thought. Nevertheless, Marlie had never been one to look a gift horse in the mouth, and she'd taken the books with open arms. And now she was ready to take the final step and aim for total body transformation.

"Well, Snowy," she whispered, cradling the cat in her arms. "Here goes nothing."

Closing her eyes, she concentrated, focusing on cats, lots of cats, big ones, small ones, tabby cats, black cats, Siamese, but mostly longhaired, fluffy white Persians. Most of all though, she thought of the very essence of catness, wrapping itself around her like a second skin, taking its cue from the real catskin on her clothes, melding with her, merging with her, blending with her aura and changing the magical field around her that told her DNA what shape to assume. And as the field around her began to shift shape, her body followed. She'd done this before, on her hands and legs, just shifting

small parts, but this was the first time she'd attempted full-body transformation. She was unprepared for the shock as her hands shrunk, fingers shortening to little stubs, but the nails growing longer, thinner and sharper, and white fur sprouting everywhere. Her hair seemed to grow longer and fell around her, sticking to her skin and seeming to

grow into it, while her limbs and body shrank, becoming smaller but tougher, body fat changing shape and becoming muscle. Her head shrank too, but remained proportionately bigger than the rest of her. Her nose shrank to a mere stub, but her eyes became far larger compared to the rest of her face. Whiskers shot out of her cheeks as her teeth lengthened and sharpened, and her mouth and chin changed shape utterly. Her clothes vanished behind the thick coat of fur, and to top it all off, a magnificent tail grew out from the end of her spine as her hips shifted position, knee joints twisting around as her legs adapted to the body of a quadruped.

The process seemed to take forever, but in fact, it was over in seconds. Snowy leapt away, yowling in panic, turning to face this intruder, this strange new creature that had appeared in place of his mistress. Marlie, blinking, licked her lips and looked about her. Had it worked?

It certainly seemed so. The colours in the room had faded to shadows of their former selves, with the green bedcovers now a shade of grey. Not only that, but everything seemed to have doubled in size. The edge of the bed seemed to be miles away. However, her actual vision had sharpened - previously dark corners were now clearly visible, and her hearing was many times more sensitive than it had been. She could hear mice scurrying around in the walls, but the sound didn't bother her. Once she would have screamed at the thought. Now, her mind was thinking 'dinner!' Shaking off such predatory thoughts, Marlie turned to see what else her new form was showing her. Except it wasn't sight that she used. For the first time, smell was giving her useful information. She could practically see the scents of her dorm mates, their pets, even her own scent, all clearly stating who had been there and when, a tell-tale sign of presence that not even all Deanna's lack of personal effects could disguise. Amazed, Marlie shook herself, and instinctively started to clean herself, licking and preening the long white fur that now covered her body. Recovering from the shock, Snowy approached, curious now, sniffing her in a gesture of cautious greeting. Uncurling, Marlie rubbed noses, inhaling the subtle scents that immediately communicated the other cat's age, sex, state of health and general attitude (six years old, male, excellent, friendly). She opened her mouth to speak and was surprised to hear herself meowing. But then, a cat that could speak English would have been just too

weird. What was strange was that she could tell exactly what Snowy was thinking.

You're new, I haven't seen you before... but you have the scent of my human! What's going on?

Marlie purred and reassured him. I am your human still... except at the moment I'm wearing a cat skin.

Snowy nodded, calming down. He'd been around witches long enough to expect the unexpected by now. His favourite human being able to put on a cat skin was nothing compared to that other human who seemed to be able to sense him without looking, or the even stranger one who could put on a scent that wasn't hers. Compared to them, or

indeed to the human whose reflexes were almost as good as a cat's, this was comparatively normal. Backing off, he began to wash himself.

Good hunting then. The sky is dark tonight - you will have shadows in plenty. Lots of mice out there!

Marlie thanked him, although she hadn't the heart to explain that she didn't hunt mice. She had the feeling that no cat would be able to fathom another cat not wanting to hunt small, furry squeaking things. Although, worryingly, she could hear mice in the distance, and some primal urge was niggling at the back of her mind that she should be out there chasing one of them into a corner and delivering speedy death with a bite to the neck. She hastily brushed such things out of her mind as she leapt to the floor without a thought and padded over to the full-

length mirror in the corner. Looking at her new reflection, she had to admit she liked what she saw.

Staring back at her was a longhaired white cat, looking a little like a Persian... except the hair wasn't as long as a typical Persians, nor did she have the squashed-in nose of a true pureblood. She was almost, but not quite, a pureblooded pedigree. Go figure. Still, she was certainly cute enough, particularly her eyes. Unlike the more usual green eyes, she was sure that her cat eyes were a striking shade of blue. All in all, she liked what she saw. At least, she did until a glint of green alerted her to the presence of another behind her. In all the excitement, she'd forgotten that there was another cat living in this dorm. Luella's jet-black feline, Sootica.

What is this?? You are no true cat! Sooty's fur was on end, eyes blazing and body language unmistakably on the offensive. Great. She'd only been a cat for a few minutes and already she was heading for a catfight. Some things never changed.

Maybe not, but this is my room, and if you challenge my right to be here, I swear I will make you regret it when I take the cat skin off! Sooty hissed in derision. Cat skin, you say? You truly believe that? Take care, silver-furred one, you cannot wear a skin for long before it starts to become truly yours. You are cat now!

Marlie fluffed her own not inconsiderable fur up and started making her own threatening gestures.

Maybe. But never only cat. Never forget that!

Then came a hiss from above them. Loyal to the last, Snowy was standing above them, perched on the end of Marlie's bed, glaring at Sooty.

Leave her be, Dark Huntress. She of the Golden Collar has as much right to rest here as we do. Has she not fed you in the past?

This was true; Marlie regularly played with and fussed over Sootica when her own cat was elsewhere. Sooty knew it too, and reluctantly backed down.

Very well then. But no good can come of this, a human wearing the skin of a cat! And if we meet elsewhere than here while you wear the form of one of us, do not expect

kindness from me! Turning away, Sooty leapt on to Luella's bed and began to wash, pointedly ignoring the other cats. Marlie turned to look up at Snowy.

Fear her not, Golden Collar. She is just jealous that you have the power, that a human is daring to become one of us, he told her.

Strange. There it was again, Golden Collar. Curious, she turned and had another look in the mirror, and hissed in outrage when she noticed, partly hidden by the fur and not obvious to one without full colour vision, a small chain with a tiny Snitch hanging off it.

She was human again in an instant, grabbing at the chain with fingers that were strangely undextrous, fumbling for the clasp until finally the necklace lay in her hands. No use wandering around with such a blatant giveaway round her neck - her cat's eyes could barely see it but a human would spot it in a second. She glanced around, wondering where she could hide it, but she was loath to leave something so personal unattended. Besides, a significant amount of her power resided in it - she wasn't entirely sure the change would work without it. Compromising, she slipped it inside her pocket and shifted back.

The change seemed easier this time. Once more the room seemed to grow to giant proportions, and the colours leached out of the world. Marlie turned to the mirror and surveyed her cat form again. No collar

this time, just a faint golden mark on her chest that might have been a Snitch. Satisfied, Marlie turned to leave. Bidding Snowy farewell, she slipped through the cat flap and padded down the corridor, heading for the common room, her eyes alive with excitement. She'd managed it! She'd become an Animaga. She'd acquired a mystical talent to match those of the others, and unlike Luella and Rianne, hers was one she'd worked for and earned. Ambition one for the year was achieved. Now it was time to see about achieving number two - acquiring a boyfriend.

No one in the Slytherin Common Room noticed as Marlie slipped out. Everyone was used to cats coming and going, and Marlie was far from being the only one to own a longhaired white cat. She attracted a few glances, but no one looked twice. Diving through the cat flap, she raced away down the corridor, rejoicing in her new-found freedom.

She wasn't entirely sure where she was aiming for. Oh, she knew vaguely where it was. But despite her connection with the Weasley twins, she'd never yet found out where their common room was.

Last year, Harry and Ron had used Polyjuice Potion to gain access to the Serpents' Nest. While admiring their audacity, Marlie wasn't one to take that sort of thing lying down. Only sneaking into Gryffindor Tower would do. Who knew, maybe she too would learn something useful. Even if not, it would prove an ample opportunity to get that bit closer to one Fred Weasley...

She raced through the silent corridors, heading in a generally upwards direction. She knew it was in one of the four towers, but which one? Nose to the ground, she reached the Entrance Hall and began to hunt for a scent trail left by a member of the Weasley

clan. After a few false trails caused by lingering traces of Ginny's scent, Marlie finally found the trail of one of her male relatives by the main stairs. The scent found, she was off. Of course, it still left the question of how, having located the common room, she was to gain access. But help was to come from an unexpected quarter.

She was passing the library when a short, bushy haired figure rushed out, clutching books to her chest and looking frazzled. It was Hermione Granger.

"I'm going to be late!" Marlie heard her whisper to herself. Of course - it must be getting close to the curfew time for the younger students. Hermione in particular wouldn't want to be caught out late. Marlie seized her chance. Meowing, she raced over to Hermione, tail raised straight up in greeting.

"What the- what are you doing out here, eh?" Hermione's voice, normally so authoritative, softened to a far gentler tone as she knelt down to pet the cat. Inside, Marlie grinned. She'd always known that, deep down, Hermione was a big softie.

"Are you all on your own, eh?" cooed Hermione, stroking the back of Marlie's neck. "Are you?"

Clearly, Marlie thought. Honestly, the way some people talked to cats. Still, she wasn't going to complain. Purring, she rubbed up against Hermione's legs, weaving around the girl, giving it her all.

"You're gorgeous, aren't you?" Hermione murmured, tickling underneath Marlie's chin. "A lovely little cat, aren't you, eh?" She stroked Marlie one last time and got up to leave. "Listen, I have to go, or I'll be late and get in trouble. You run on home, yeah?" She prepared to leave, but Marlie was having none of it. Purring even louder, she ran after Hermione, weaving in and out of her legs, making it impossible for the Gryffindor to go any further without tripping.

"Argh... bloody cats... get out of my way!" Hermione scolded, without success. Marlie's mewling completely drowned out any sound. Finally, Hermione gave in and picked the cat up, staring it straight in the eyes.

"What am I going to do with you, eh?" she said sadly. "You're a lovely cat, and I'd love to take you back with me..." here Marlie mewed pitifully and tried to look pathetic and sad, "but I can't! Won't your owner want to know where you are?" Marlie mewed again, cutting a sad and pathetic figure indeed. Hermione, her heart breaking, put the cat down again.

"Look, I have to go now," said Hermione desperately. "Or I'll be late. You go home, all right? Go on, go. Shoo." Gathering her things, she walked briskly off down the corridor. However, Marlie was not to be put off so easily. Still meowing, she raced off after Hermione, chasing her down the corridor. Hermione tried to ignore her, but eventually, she had to give in. Turning around, she gathered the cat up again.

"All right, all right!" she sighed. "You can come with me. But if your owner turns up, you go back with her, OK?"

Jubilant, Marlie purred, and rubbed her head up against Hermione's cheek, before leaping to the floor and dancing around her.

"Come on then, if you're coming," said Hermione, briskness replacing her earlier motherly tones. "Because we really will be late now." With the small white cat running after her, Hermione turned and made for the Gryffindor common room.

The reaction of Gryffindor House to Hermione's new companion was mixed, to say the least, and it was mostly determined by gender. Most of the girls, with the exception of Angelina Johnson, were instantly smitten, gazing wistfully at the cat and wishing they had one. Lavender

and Parvati immediately abandoned their homework and raced over, fussing over Marlie as they stroked her fur.

"Oh, isn't she lovely!" sighed Parvati. "She's so cute!"

"Wherever did you find her, Hermione, she's gorgeous!" said Lavender, enthralled.

"She was wandering the corridor on her own, and insisted on following me," said Hermione gruffly, her earlier sentimentality well hidden once more. She might well agree with every word Lavender and Parvati were saying... but that didn't mean the whole house had to know.

By this time, Ron and Harry had come to see what all the fuss was about. Ron's reaction typified perfectly the other, mostly male, response to the new arrival.

"Bloody hell, Hermione, what have you got now?" groaned Ron, eyeing the cat suspiciously.

"It's a cat," said Hermione defensively, scooping Marlie up in her arms. "And I didn't 'get' her. She just followed me here and wouldn't go away."

Harry peered over, and tickled Marlie under the chin, smiling at her. He was one of the exceptions to the usual Gryffindor male response of barely tolerating the newcomer.

"She's very cute," he grinned, as Marlie, sensing a good opportunity to insinuate herself into Gryffindor's inner sanctum, began purring and rubbing her head against his hand. Harry played with the cat briefly before turning to Hermione, now serious.

"Hermione, does this cat's owner know she's here? Because this is no stray, surely. This cat's a pedigree, and they generally have owners. Owners who paid a lot of money for their cat and would not be pleased if someone else decided to adopt it."

"Probably belongs to one of the Slytherins," Ron threw in. "They go in for fancy and decorative pets with no purpose except to match the furniture and prove how much money they've got to throw around. Probably has a diamond collar and a solid gold food bowl, and it's own four poster bed." He seemed to cheer up at the prospect of stealing a Slytherin's cat. "That's probably why it's run away - it's fed up of being

force fed caviar every day. Actually, you know what? Forget I complained. Keep it as a pet, you're doing the poor thing a favour."

"Ron!" Hermione snapped. All the same, she felt under the fur for a collar. "Hmm, no collar. And I don't recall seeing it around."

"Doesn't mean a thing," said Harry. "It might belong to a first year. And not all owned cats have collars - Muggle cats can be microchipped, and I wouldn't be at all surprised if there's a similar way of marking a magical cat."

"There is," Parvati chipped in. "Hang on, let me." She waved her wand over Marlie and intoned "Revelo Suzerainta!"

The charm wound itself around the cat briefly, before dissipating to reveal absolutely nothing. Parvati shrugged her shoulders.

"No ownership charm on it. It's either a stray or a Muggle-born's cat."

"Well, I can't believe someone out there isn't missing her - she's a beautiful cat!" Lavender declared. "She must have cost a fortune!"

Parvati shook her head. "Not necessarily. That's not a pedigree. The facial features of a true Persian are different. And the fur's longer. That's just a long-haired white cat. Might be a pedigree... but might not be. Could just be a half-blood, which increases the possibility that it's a stray."

"Like a stray's going to have found its way all the way out here!" Ron pointed out. "Hogwarts is miles from anywhere, except Hogsmeade. It either belongs to someone at school or in the village, which means it's

either run away from its owner or been abandoned. Either way, someone around here will know about it."

"He's got a point, Hermione," Harry said gently. "She probably has a home around here somewhere."

Hermione cradled the cat tenderly. Even though she'd known this all along, part of her had got very attached to the little cat, and she was loath to part with her.

"What do I do, Harry?" she asked sadly. "She followed me of her own free will, I can't just kick her out! It'd be wrong."

Harry seemed to guess how she was feeling.

"Well, don't then," he said. "You know what cats are. Chances are she'll go back when she's good and ready - there is a cat flap after all. You're not keeping her a prisoner. But if it makes you feel better, we can help you try and track down her owner. I can get Colin to take her picture, and maybe we could ask Dean to design some posters for us to put up round school. That way, if she does have an owner, we can track them down and give her back. That's assuming she settles here permanently and doesn't disappear later on."

"Which it probably will," Ron put in. "There's this cat round our way that's got about five different families each thinking it's their cat. Disgusting behaviour if you ask me."

"I didn't," Hermione snapped. She turned her attention back to Harry. "Oh Harry, would you really help me find her owner? I couldn't bear the

thought of some little Muggle-born first year all on their own wondering what happened to their cat."

"I could," Ron grinned. "Especially if it's some spoilt little Slytherin brat..."

"Ron!" Hermione glared at him. "Will you be quiet?" She turned away and smiled gently at the cat in her arms. Marlie purred back, before reaching up and patting Hermione's nose with her paw. Hermione giggled happily, all pretence at not caring gone.

"I don't suppose it'll do any harm," she murmured to herself, little realising what she was letting herself in for, and how wrong she would later prove to be. "After all, I'm not keeping her, right? If her owner turns up and wants her back, I'll give her back. I'm not stealing her, she chose to follow me. Right, Harry?"

"Right, Hermione," Harry grinned. "Whatever you say."

And so the evening passed, with Marlie the cat having the run of the common room and generally being either fussed over or ignored. Hermione had gone back to her homework once the initial fuss had died down, and while she was willing to play with her new-found pet if Marlie bothered her, it was clear that she really wanted to be studying. Marlie wasn't complaining. It gave her the opportunity to explore, eavesdrop, and soak up attention and cat treats from the other Gryffindors. However, it did disturb her somewhat that cat lovers appeared to be nothing like as frequent as they generally were in Slytherin. While not all Slytherins liked cats, and many of those who did didn't always show it, most Slytherins, male and female alike, usually had a good word and a warm lap for any passing cat that happened to sidle up and make their presence felt. Here, it mostly seemed to be the girls, and by no means all of them, who fussed over cats. Most of the boys were doing their best to pretend she wasn't there. In particular, one boy who would have been first to seek out her attention had she been in her human form.

Marlie took in the gaudy surroundings of the Gryffindor common room and noted with disgust that, the colour scheme aside, it was far nicer than the Slytherin one, not needing dehumidifiers to keep the atmosphere dry and mildew-free. The furniture also looked far more

comfortable, as opposed to the heavy black furniture the Slytherins had been issued with, and most importantly of all, there was a window. Inwardly seething, Marlie wondered how to go about putting in a complaint without giving away the fact that she'd got in to the Gryffindor common room without permission. Still, no matter. It might be a nicer room, but it didn't have a sound system. And, thanks to a quick owl home to her father requesting a copy of the Ikea catalogue, there might soon be some trendy furniture adorning the Serpents' Nest too. But that was a later project. Right now, she had her heart set on another goal - namely, one Fred Weasley.

Tail straight up, the end flicking around in a way that meant 'cool cat on her way', she sauntered over to where Fred and his twin were admiring a souvenir of Lee Jordan's recent visit to his relatives in Trinidad.

"Tell you what, you've brought some cool things back from that voodoo priest granddad of yours, but this takes some beating," said Fred, enthralled.

"Yeah, I don't anyone's ever brought back a talking shrunken head before," said George, prodding it with his wand.

"Hey, mon, watch what ya doin' wit' dat t'ing!" the head snapped at George. "You could 'urt someone, pokin' 'em about wit' ya wand like dat!"

"Me?" said George, wide-eyed. "As if I would!" His words were immediately belied by blue sparks coming from his wand, one almost igniting one of the head's dreadlocks.

The head rolled its eyes and implored Lee,

"Get me away from dis one! 'E is not safe! 'E is a liability! You are not telling me dat his tribal elders seriously t'ink 'e is safe to be messin' aroun' with dark forces?"

"I know, it amazes me sometimes as well," said Lee, calmly moving the head out of reach of marauding Weasleys. "Sit tight, Winston, I'll make sure they don't hurt you."

"Winston?" Fred asked, raising an eyebrow. "Is that what it's called?"

"After Mr. Churchill," said Winston proudly. "My mother was a great admirer of 'im. Greatest Prime Minister Britain ever had. Only person she had more regard for was da Queen Mother. Lord, da teasing my poor sista got at school. Not easy goin' t'ru life when ya name's Queen Mother Jones."

Fred and George's cackles at this brought the head to Angelina's attention.

"Oh god," she sighed. "Not one of those. My gran in Jamaica's got a collection of them. They sing the entire back catalogue of Bob Marley. And trust me, a genius though he was, when you've heard 'Exodus' sung over and over again in the wrong key, the novelty soon wears off."

The head noticed Angelina and grinned, wolf whistling at her.

"Hey baby!" it shouted. "That is one sexy mama! Hey sugar, what are you doing tonight? Spend it wit' me and I'll give you some true Trinidadian lovin' you'll never forget!"

Angelina narrowed her eyes at it.

"Lee," she said dangerously. "Remove that thing from this common room this instant, or I shall burn it."

Lee gathered up the head, looking hurt.

"He's only teasing," he protested.

"He may be. I am not," Angelina replied tersely, fingering her wand. Taking the hint, Lee took the head and retreated with it to the safety of the dorm, the head still calling to Angelina as it disappeared up the stairs. Angelina, ignoring it, settled down in the chair Lee had just left.

"Thank god that thing's gone," she shuddered. "God, I can't stand voodoo. All those bits of dead things everywhere, and those grotesque altars of theirs... Ugh!"

"Isn't your gran one of the most feared voodoo priestesses in Jamaica?" asked Fred slyly.

"And doesn't your mum still sell voodoo potions and amulets to the West Indian and African population of most of South London?" George pressed her. Angelina nodded sadly.

"Yeah," she said. "I tell you, you think your home life is bad, you try living in my house. We got two kitchens. One is for cooking in, and the other...well let's just say you do NOT want to get the two mixed up."

"So, your mother's attempts to keep you in touch with your roots didn't work then," Fred grinned. Mrs. Johnson, Jamaican born and bred, regularly took both her daughters to visit their Caribbean relatives in an attempt to keep their black identities alive. So far, at least as far as Angelina was concerned, it hadn't worked.

"Not like she hoped," Angelina laughed. "I went to Jamaica to find my roots, and I did. It's just unfortunate that my roots happen to be in Balham."

It was at this point that Marlie decided to make her presence felt. Mewing, she leapt up and settled on the arm of Fred's chair.

As expected, Angelina glared at her, but that was no surprise. Angelina usually glared at Marlie all the time while she was in human form as well. What was a shock was the way Fred was looking at her.

"Oh bloody hell," he muttered. "Why do these bloody animals always go for me? Surely they must know by now that I hate cats?" He shoved at Marlie. "Go on, get out of here, you mangy fiend. Go and bother someone else."

Stunned, Marlie could only manage an astonished meow. He didn't like cats? He couldn't stand her totem animal, the creature that represented her very nature? Not willing to believe it, she began rubbing up against him.

"Oh for Holda's sake," Fred muttered. "Wretched animal, why won't you leave me alone??" Giving her a shove, he pushed her off the chair, causing her to fall back and hit the floor with a thud. Marlie winced in pain. She hadn't fallen far enough for her cat reflexes to fully kick in and cause her to land on her feet. She'd have bruises on her hip for days now. Wonderful.

Far more painful though was the sudden knowledge that Fred Weasley, her childhood sweetheart, and the boy she'd been about to make her boyfriend, hated, loathed and

despised the very animal that lay at the heart of her being. That her totem animal, the skin which she'd worked so hard to weave and wear, was something that could only ever earn hatred from him. Fred glanced at her and noticed with some irritation that she was still there.

"What?" he snapped. "Stop staring at me! Bloody flea-bitten moggy... Hermione!" he yelled. "Your cat is staring at me!"

Hermione, frowning, got up and approached.

"So?" she said in a huff. "A cat may look at a king, you know. She was just being friendly, weren't you sweetie?" She bent down to pick Marlie up, but the cat was having none of it. Right now, all she wanted to do was run, run back to the safety of the Serpents' Nest, where people were mostly cat-friendly, and where no one she could recall would ever push a cat off a chair just because she was trying to be friends. Squirming out of Hermione's grasp, she bolted for the door, dived through the Gryffindor cat flap and was off, racing for home.

Hermione stared after the retreating cat with a lump in her throat, before turning on Fred.

"This is all your fault!" she shouted. "You've upset her, and now she might never come back!"

"This is a bad thing how?" Fred inquired. This was not the cleverest thing to have said, as Hermione drew herself up to her full height and prepared to let rip.

"She was my cat!" Hermione screamed. "I liked her! And she liked me, and she would have liked being here too, if you hadn't mistreated her! Now she probably thinks we're all horrible people, and won't ever come back here! I've lost the only pet I've ever had in the space of three hours, and it's all your fault!!" Turning away, she raced off for the safety of her dorm, tears in her eyes. Fred nervously glanced around, noticing the eyes of the common room upon him, particularly those of his brother Ron, who looked most annoyed with him, and even those of Angelina, who didn't like cats any more than he did.

"What?" he asked her. "You hate cats!"

"Maybe I do," Angelina replied, "but you don't think that perhaps that was a bit insensitive?"

"She's got a point," George put in. "You were a bit mean to her."

Fred had to admit that maybe he'd been somewhat tactless.

"But it's not her cat anyway. It was just a stray that wandered in here. She must have known that it would probably go home eventually."

"Oh yeah," said George. "But Fred, mate, that didn't mean she was
happy about it."

Marlie, on leaving Gryffindor Tower, had kept running on autopilot, not pausing for breath and not stopping, just wanting to get away. Away from heartbreak, away from pain, away from that twisted glare of Fred Weasley's. All she wanted to do was run home and hide, curled up on her bed where no one and nothing could hurt her.

Which was why she didn't approach the Entrance Hall a little more warily, and why she didn't see the intruder who would later have such an impact on her life before he saw her.

She was halfway down the stairs, white coat gleaming in the moonlight before she noticed that the doors were open and a dark silhouette was watching her. A cold draught swirled up the stairs stopping her in her tracks as she shivered, looking to see where it was coming from. And froze as she realised that one of the main doors was ajar, and a shaft of moonlight was beaming in. Two things were immediately apparent: that it was falling straight upon her, and with her white coat, that meant she was out in the open and completely exposed. The other was that the creature that had opened the doors in the first place was standing in the hallway, caught in the act of prowling across the room, looking straight up at the flash of white that had come barrelling down the stairs. Straight up at her.

It was a big, black dog, one of the biggest Marlie had ever seen, with a long shaggy coat that would have camouflaged it totally had it not been standing in a pool of light. At first, she'd thought it was a Grim, dread

harbinger of death and misery. However, the scent that the wind had wafted her way had put paid to that idea. It was a dog all right, but hardly a normal one. Underneath the dog scent was another scent far more disturbing - that of a human male in his thirties or forties. Like her, he was an Animagus.

For a moment, nothing happened. Brilliant blue cat eyes met dark brown dog eyes, Animaga confronted Animagus, and the world held its breath. A silent struggle for dominance ensued, and Marlie quietly began to panic. A wizard, an adult wizard, with the same talent she had. She had no idea who he was, but she did know that he was a lot more powerful than her, and that he probably knew that she was more than just an ordinary cat. She could only hope that his intentions were friendly. He didn't have the scent of anyone she knew.

Their eyes locked, and everything seemed to stand still. Then, without warning, the dog turned and ran out of the building as silently as he'd come, the door clicking closed behind him. Marlie blinked. Had she really managed to scare him off? It didn't seem credible. The only advantage she'd had was that she was on her home ground. It seemed that whoever he was, he hadn't wanted a fight. Whether it was because of his conscience or simply to avoid detection and trouble, she didn't know. But she was certain that he wasn't supposed to be here, and was up to nothing good. Not only that, but he now knew there was another Animage on the premises, who also happened to know his secret. She hastily made her way back to the Serpents' Nest, her heart pounding. Something told her that she hadn't seen the last of him.

Chapter Fourteen Enter Padfoot

The next morning found the once more human Marlie racing to the library as soon as her lessons permitted. Fighting the crowds in the corridor, and wishing she could just shapeshift and dive through everyone's legs, she finally made it into Madam Pince's Inner Sanctum.

"Er, hello," she grinned, trying to ignore the snide look on the librarian's face. Marlie was not a regular visitor by any means, especially not this early in the term. "I was wondering, do you have a copy of the Register of Animagi I could look at?"

Madam Pince's eyebrow lifted, although she seemed surprised rather than anything.

"The Register of Animagi? Now that is surprising. Normally it just sits there from one month to the next, and now two people ask for it in one morning. Very strange. Might I ask why you want to see it?"

Now that was the question Marlie had been hoping to avoid. Fortunately, inspiration struck.

"Oh, there's a rumour going around the Slytherin common room that Professor Lupin's one and I wanted to check if it were true."

Oddly, Madam Pince seemed to gasp sharply at this before regaining her composure.

"I see," she said. "And what might be the grounds for that particular rumour?"

Good question. Marlie did some quick thinking.

"Gods know. Probably because of his specialism in Dark Creatures," Marlie shrugged. "So who was the other student asking for it?"

"As to that," said Madam Pince as she led Marlie over to the shelves containing Ministry volumes, "it was Hermione Granger."

Hermione was still there, staring at the pages in front of her as Marlie approached. Marlie winced as she saw her there. It was obvious to any casual observer that Hermione wasn't really reading, and Marlie had an inkling as to why.

"Er, excuse me?" Marlie coughed. "Are you, like, done with that?"

Hermione started, staring at Marlie blankly before forcing an artificial smile on to her face.

"Oh! Er, yes, yes, I think so. Why, did you want to have a look?"

"If I may." Marlie took the seat next to Hermione. "So what were you after?"

Hermione indicated the page in front of her, with the dates '1900 - 2000' at the top and a list of seven names and accompanying pictures underneath.

"This century's Animagi. I was looking up Professor McGonagall."

Sure enough, the name of Minerva McGonagall, illustrated by two pictures, one of the Gryffindor Head, and the other of a tabby cat with that same distinct air of sternness about it, was listed near the bottom alongside the date 1962. Marlie made a mental note to keep an eye out for that particular cat.

"Who else is there?" she asked, scanning the names, looking in particular for a thirty or forty something male who took the form of a big black dog. "Anyone managed it since McGonagall?"

"Only one person," said Hermione. "Marlene McKinnon from Surrey in 1963, who changed into a puma. But she was killed by You-Know-Who in 1976, so I don't suppose it really matters."

"Suppose not," said Marlie. "Does that mean McGonagall's the only living Animage in the country?"

"Pretty much," said Hermione. "There's only been seven this century, and two of them died of old age years ago. Two were killed in the war, while one, Scylla Tyler, contracted rabies in the 20's after getting attacked by a pack of wild dogs in Bulgaria, went mad and drowned herself. I think she might be a relative of Deanna's, you know. Apart from McGonagall, the only other one is a Doris Pritchard living in Bexhill who is 94 and changes into a tortoise."

"Oh." There went that idea, although Marlie wasn't really surprised. If you were up to no good with your Animagus form, you were hardly likely to register and make it easier to get caught. "What if someone decides not to register?"

Hermione blinked, astonished that someone might not register themselves with the Ministry. "But that's illegal!" she said. "You could go to Azkaban for that!"

"Has anyone ever gone to Azkaban for it?" Marlie asked. Hermione shook her head.

"No. Marlene McKinnon nearly did, but she was an Auror and they couldn't afford to lose good Aurors back then. I think they just made her register and reprimanded her for it. Other than that, no illegal Animagi have ever come to light, not this century anyway."

Which didn't mean that there weren't any, as Marlie knew only too well. It only confirmed her suspicions that last night's intruder had been up to no good. Thanking Hermione, she got up to leave.

"Marlie, wait," Hermione called. Turning around, Marlie noticed that the Gryffindor was looking awfully nervous all of a sudden.

"Yes?" Marlie asked, worried. Despite her notorious self-centredness, Marlie had never complained yet about being fussed over and told she was cute, and had, against her better judgement, become rather fond of the third year. She sat down again. "Is

something wrong?" she asked gently, knowing that the answer would be yes, and that it would involve a fluffy white cat.

"Do you know anyone who's lost a cat?" Hermione asked, her lip quivering. "It'd probably be a Muggle-born, and probably a first year too."

"The cat or the owner?" Marlie asked, unable to resist a quip.

"The owner!" Hermione snapped. "The cat's a long haired white cat with blue eyes. Ron reckons it's the sort of fancy cat that a Slytherin might own, and I'm inclined to agree with him. Do you know whose it might be?"

Marlie fought back her anxiety. This was her chance to stop Hermione asking questions that might risk exposing her, without actually lying. She was not slow in snatching it up.

"Well, there's an awful lot of white Persians in Slytherin, but I don't think any have gone missing. I didn't see any firsties in tears this morning, although to be honest, you probably wouldn't in Slytherin. But I'll ask around. I'll check with the Ravenclaws too, see if any of them are missing a cat."

"Would you?" Hermione asked eagerly. "I'd be really grateful."

"No probs," Marlie replied, sitting down again. "Why do you ask?" Although she knew exactly why, she felt a disturbing need to find out Hermione's side of things regardless.

"Oh well, it's nothing really," Hermione sighed. "Just this cat I ran into last night near the library." She launched into the tale of how she'd lost and found the small white cat that had managed to steal her heart.

"So what do I do now?" Hermione asked plaintively as she finished. "Do I try and find its original owner or adopt the cat myself? And if I do track the owner down, what do I say? 'I found your cat last night but my idiot housemate scared her off and now I don't know where she is'?"

Hermione looked at her wit's end. Shakily, Marlie reached out and touched the young Gryffindor's shoulder. The need to manipulate warred with the alien desire to comfort... then realised that they could perhaps collaborate after all.

"Maybe you're going about this the wrong way," Marlie said slowly. Hermione looked up, a hard edge in her eyes.

"Wrong how?" she asked.

"Well," said Marlie thoughtfully, "you're missing one important thing. And that is that your cat is not a toy, not a child, not a thing with no thoughts or feelings of its own, nor a kitten with no awareness of life's dangers. It's an adult living creature, with its own desires and wants. You don't own cats, Hermione, they decide to stay with you or not. You saw it yourself last night - the cat came to you freely, and when it wanted to leave, it did. Chances are it's more than capable of looking after itself. It almost

certainly has a home elsewhere, and probably the humans around her never even noticed she was gone." That was true enough - her dorm mates were still in the common room when she'd returned, and no one had questioned her as to where she'd been.

"I suppose so," said Hermione, seeming to warm to Marlie's point of view. "I mean, it's not like I kidnapped her or anything. If the cat wants to spend time with me, that's up to her, right?"

"Right!" Marlie smiled, relieved that she'd managed to talk Hermione out of any potentially troublesome investigations into the cat's origins.

"The cat seems to like you, you obviously like her, why not just enjoy her company while it lasts? Let the cat divide her time between you and her other humans as she sees fit. While she's with you, treat her as your beloved pet. But always be aware that you do not own her, and that she has another life elsewhere that you couldn't even begin to imagine, and that has nothing whatsoever to do with you."

Hermione nodded, clearly swayed. She began to smile.

"You're right," she answered. "Absolutely right." She got up. "Thanks, Marlie, you've been really helpful!"

"Any time, Hermione," Marlie smiled back, amazed at her own cunning. "Any time."

There had been more than one person in Gryffindor affected by the arrival of the cat. And one of those whose future was about to change the most had absolutely no idea that anything was untoward.

"So, today's finally the day, is it?" Lee Jordan asked with a grin. Winston the shrunken head was safely stowed away in Gryffindor Tower, which was probably just as well. Fred in particular had very good reasons indeed for wanting something that couldn't resist the temptation to harass every woman in sight as far away as possible. Fred Weasley had finally decided that the time was right to ask Marlie Lovegood out on a date.

"Yep," Fred nodded, rubbing his hands with glee. "My bachelor days will soon be no more! I, boys, am about to get a girlfriend!"

"Congratulations," George noted, surprisingly sanguine about his twin's eagerness to leave their sibling bond behind in favour of romantic entanglements. "Of course, in three months time, you'll almost certainly be longing to be free and single again, but who am I to bring you back to reality when there's the possibility of a snog in the offing?"

"She ain't said yes yet," Lee smirked. "If I was Marls, I'd be heading for the hills right now."

Truer words were never yet spoken. George caught his eye behind Fred's back and rolled his eyes. True, Marlie liked Fred and was charmed by him. But George was distant enough to see what Fred could not - that unless one could afford to buy

jewellery and gifts on a regular basis, the love of La Lovegood was a far-off prize indeed.

So it was that Marlie found herself ambushed on the main stairs as she attempted to return to her common room.

"What is it, boys?" she asked, addressing George and Lee, but pointedly ignoring Fred. She had not forgotten Fred's behaviour last night. Her shoulder was still sore despite a visit to Madam Pomfrey that morning citing a fall from her broom.

Fred, noticing that his friends were just a bit too close for comfort, motioned for them to fall back, which they did, retreating to the foot of the stairs. However, he didn't notice the sudden scowl on Marlie's face.

Lee was rather more observant.

"Oh dear," he murmured to George. "He's pissed her off already. That doesn't look good, does it?"

George shook his head. "Nope. I'd say my brother is about get his face slapped."

Fred, blissfully unaware of all this, turned back to Marlie, smiling.

"Hey, Marls," he greeted her. "How's tricks?"

"Could be better," Marlie snapped. "Some insensitive ailurophobic oaf injured one of my favourite cats. The poor little thing's been limping all morning."

"Poor thing," Fred replied, attempting to sound sympathetic. Marlie cut him dead.

"Fred," she glared at him. "You hate cats."

"I don't hate them," Fred protested, wondering how this conversation had got so far off track. "I just don't see the point of them, that's all."

"Exactly," said Marlie coldly.

Fred shook his head. "Look, this is getting us nowhere. Marls, listen, what are you doing next Hogsmeade weekend? Because if you're not busy, we could have a drink together, just the two of us, what do you say..." His voice trailed off as he finally noticed the icy, uncomprehending stare Marlie was giving him.

"Fred."

"What?" Fred asked, guessing that he wasn't about to like the response.

"I'd rather go for a drink with Jack the Ripper than you."

"What?" Fred gasped. "What did I do? I'm not that bad, am I?"

"You hate cats," Marlie restated. "That's all the reason I need." Pushing past him, she prepared to walk downstairs. Fred grabbed her by the wrist, not content with this answer.

"Marls, wait, at least tell me what I did!" he cried. Marlie hissed, struggling to get free.

"Fred Weasley, let go of me!" she shouted at him, wrenching her wrist free after a struggle. Unfortunately for Marlie, she'd forgotten that she was standing on a staircase. Losing her balance, she fell backwards, crashing down the stairs.

Marlie could only watch as the world seemed to go into slow-motion. I'm going to die. A head over heels fall down a solid stone staircase could only end in one way. Except it didn't. While Marlie's mind could only look on, her body had other ideas, and began to move, somehow pushing her away from the steps, twisting and turning in mid-air, rotating around until she finally hit the bottom feet first, landing on all fours, arms and legs soaking up the impact, leaving her breathless, bruised, but otherwise uninjured.

"Marls!!" she heard Fred yelling as he raced down after her, trying to push through the crowd that had gathered around her. Slowly, she picked herself up, wincing at the renewed pain in her shoulders, and the new pains in her legs. However, nothing appeared to be broken, and she'd had worse Quidditch injuries. She'd been lucky. Fallen on her feet, quite literally. Looking up, she saw Fred trying to reach her, and recoiled.

"Get away from me!" she tried to shriek, but the words only came out as a whisper. The crowd parted, and Fred reached out and touched her.

"Marlie?" he whispered, visibly pale. "Are you alright?"

This time, Marlie had no trouble with her voice. The famous Lovegood shriek was alive and well.

"Get away from me!!" she screamed, pushing him back and staggering away. Straight into the arms of Professor Lupin, who had been drawn by the commotion.

"Marlene?" he asked softly, staring at her in concern. "Are you alright?"

Numb, Marlie shook her head. "Get me out of here," she whispered quietly, so quietly she didn't think anyone had heard. However, Lupin seemed to have done, because he nodded once, and turned to Fred, who had halted about a metre away.

"Fred Weasley," Lupin said, sounding almost like Snape in his coldness, "what have you done to the poor girl? Explain yourself!"

"I... I didn't mean... it was an accident!" Fred pleaded. He turned his attention to Marlie. "Marls, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you, I'm sorry!"

Marlie didn't answer. She just turned away, edging closer to Lupin, who put his arm around her.

"Marlene?" he asked, a fierceness in his eyes that belied his gentle demeanour. "Did he push you?"

Finally, Marlie lifted her eyes to meet Lupin's. It occurred to her that it would be so easy to say yes, Fred had pushed her downstairs after she'd refused to go out with him, neatly taking revenge on him for rejecting her cat form. So easy... except she found herself staring once more into those amber eyes, and something in her knew that he would know if she lied to him, and she would be forever diminished in his sight from then on.

"No," she heard herself say in tones that were loud enough to be heard by those nearest to her. "No, it was an accident. We were arguing, I walked away, lost my footing and fell. That's all."

The anger seemed to die out of Lupin's eyes, although the gentleness remained.

"I see," he said, before turning sharply back to Fred. "I'll have to report this incident to Professor McGonagall. She'll decide what, if any, action needs to be taken. Fred, I want a written statement detailing exactly what happened from you by five o'clock today. If you can produce any witnesses to corroborate your version of things, so much the better. In the mean time, be more careful in future, and do not have your arguments on staircases. Marlene could have been seriously hurt." He

turned to Marlie again, leading her away. "Come on, let's get you to the hospital wing."

"I'm alright, really," Marlie protested, her natural resilience beginning to calm her nerves and heal her injuries. "I've had worse injuries in Quidditch, really."

"Then you'll be in and out again within fifteen minutes, and you won't begrudge a little of your time, will you?" said Lupin calmly. "Besides, you look like you could do with a rest."

That she couldn't deny. Besides, if the truth be told, she wasn't exactly averse to the opportunity to be alone with Remus Lupin. Acquiescing, she allowed him to lead her away.

"Another fall?" Madam Pomfrey exclaimed after Lupin escorted Marlie into the hospital wing. "Good gods, you must be the most accident-prone child I've had through these doors since Nymphadora Tonks graduated!"

"Another?" Lupin asked, startled. "When did the other one happen?"

"She came in this morning with an injured shoulder caused by a Quidditch fall," said Madam Pomfrey sternly. "Honestly, Miss Lovegood, you must take more care of yourself on that broom! All those dangerous stunts of yours... not that you're the worst by any means, it just seems like you're in here for extended periods every other year."

"This one wasn't Quidditch-related," said Lupin, his voice sombre. "She fell downstairs after an argument with Fred Weasley." He exchanged glances with Madam Pomfrey, who immediately changed from scolding to solicitous.

"There, there, child," she said soothingly. "Come and sit down." She led Marlie to sit on a spare bed before turning back to Lupin angrily. "And I always thought Fred Weasley was such a nice boy! I never thought he'd do something like that."

"It wasn't like that!" Marlie protested, as both teachers gazed sympathetically at her. "He didn't push me, I lost my balance and fell! It's what happens when you try to walk off in a huff while you're halfway up a flight of stairs!"

"Dear, it's nothing to be ashamed of," said Madam Pomfrey, in the tone of voice of one who'd heard similar rationalisations all too often. "These things can happen to any witch who gets involved with the wrong man."

"I'm not involved with him!" Marlie snapped. "Professor, tell her!"

"She's right, Poppy, it was an accident," said Lupin, coming to her aid. "Fred Weasley looked too shocked to have done it deliberately, although I shall be reporting the matter to Professor McGonagall in any case. I think she's been lucky this time, but you'd best check her over just in case. After that, I'd like a word with Marlene on her own, if you don't mind."

Madam Pomfrey tutted as she examined Marlie, clearly unconvinced but evidently deciding to accept the accident explanation as the official one. After diagnosing nothing worse than a few strains, bruises, and a dislocated shoulder, which was soon fixed, she cast some healing charms, prescribed a muscle relaxant cream and a hot bath, and left Lupin alone with Marlie in her office.

Lupin sat down opposite Marlie, and regarded her gently.

"Well?" he said. "Care to tell me what happened?"

"I did," said Marlie uncertainly. "We argued, I turned to leave, forgot I was halfway up a flight of stairs and lost my footing. That's all."

"Uh-huh," Lupin nodded. "Marlene, I hope you won't think me trying to pry, but it's staffroom knowledge that there's something going on between you two, and..."

"He is not my boyfriend," Marlie interrupted. "He never has been, and he never will be!"

Lupin allowed himself a smile. "Good. I'm glad to hear it. It makes things a lot less complicated, for Fred at least." He leaned forward, curious now. "So what did happen? What were you arguing about?"

Marlie looked away. This was going to take some explaining. How to give an answer that would satisfy him without giving away her secret ability to shapeshift? Still, she was not a Slytherin for no reason. While a direct lie would almost certainly be spotted, a misleading statement that just happened to be perfectly true could well pass unnoticed.

"Well," Marlie began, "I was talking to Hermione this morning, and she told me that..." She related how Hermione had been followed home by a stray cat, and how Fred had angrily pushed it off his chair, causing it to run away, never to be seen again.

"As you can imagine, Hermione wasn't particularly pleased, as she'd grown quite attached to that cat, and this morning, she was asking me if I knew whose it was, as she thought it might be a Slytherin's, what with being a fancy long-haired one and all."

"You like cats, then," said Lupin.

Marlie nodded. "Yeah. I've got one myself, he's lovely. First thing I saw in my Sleeping Death trance. Apparently, he used to come and visit me in the hospital wing and lick my face, trying to wake me up. He's such a sweetie," Marlie enthused, before realising that it was perhaps a little undignified to be seen to be quite so passionate about a cat. Still, Lupin seemed to understand.

"I see," he nodded. "They're your favourite animal, and when you heard that Fred can't stand them and actually hurt one, you got angry at him and didn't want anything to do with him."

"That's right."

"So you leave Hermione and head for the stairs, intending to go back to your common room, no doubt to complain to your friends about what a cruel man Fred Weasley is."

"Something like that," Marlie grinned.

"And then he approaches you on the stairs, while you are not in the best of moods with him, yes? So tell me what happened then."

"The bastard asked me out!" Marlie fumed. "Pardon my language," she added hastily.

"You're pardoned," Lupin smiled. "And may I presume from this that you told him to go to Niflheim?"

"I think I may have said that Jack the Ripper would be a more charming dinner companion," said Marlie delicately. This time, Lupin couldn't hold back a laugh.

"I see. And then you tried to get away."

"Yeah. But Fred grabbed my arm, and wanted to know what had happened, as only the other day I'd been giving completely the opposite signal. Which was true - if I hadn't known about the cat incident, I'd probably have said yes," Marlie sighed.

"That would explain a lot," Lupin said to himself. "How did you react after he grabbed you?"

"I told him to let me go," replied Marlie. "Then I pushed him away, pulled my arm free... and stupidly forgot Newton's First Law."

Lupin looked up, frowning. "What would that be?"

"For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction," Marlie quoted. "In other words, if you push someone in one direction, you will get pushed the same distance in the other, especially if you pull your arm that way anyway. Now, if you're on level ground, that's fine, but if you're halfway up a flight of stairs..." She let Lupin work the rest out for himself.

Lupin winced. "Ouch. I quite see your point. In order to wrap things up then, you fall, miraculously land on your feet and avoid serious injury, and when Fred comes to see if you're alright, you quite understandably don't want him anywhere near you. That's when I come to your rescue." Marlie couldn't have sworn to this, but he seemed oddly pleased at the prospect. "Well, that all seems perfectly reasonable. Unfortunate, but nevertheless understandable. Marlene, I'm going to have to ask you to put all that in writing, I'm afraid. Professor McGonagall will want to see it, and I daresay your house head will be interested too..." He stopped, as the noise of footsteps was heard outside, and a raised voice that could only be that of Professor Snape.

"Speak of the devil," Lupin muttered, gritting his teeth. Sure enough, the door was flung open, and Snape strode in, furious.

"Lupin!" he thundered. "What is the meaning of this, and why wasn't I informed earlier that one of my students had been injured?"

Lupin, irked that Snape was interfering just as he was about to wrap things up, lost no time in rising to the bait.

"Possibly because I was busy escorting the poor girl to the hospital wing?" he snapped.

"Oh, I see," Snape hissed. "And while you were doing that, you were just going to let Weasley off scot-free?"

"Fred Weasley isn't going anywhere," Lupin replied, rising to his feet to look Snape in the eye. "Marlene could have been seriously injured, and I felt it was rather more urgent to attend to her first. Rest assured I will

be making a full report to Professor McGonagall once I have spoken to both students."

"You're making a report??" Snape sneered. "A boy pushes his girlfriend downstairs in full view of everyone, and all you can do is make a report?"

Marlie could take it no more. She was not having Snape of all people making assumptions about her private life.

"He is not my boyfriend!" she snapped. "And he did not push me, I fell! And while we're on the topic, hello? Uninjured, conscious and able to speak over here! You could bother to ask me what happened rather than the Slytherin rumour mill!"

Snape whirled to face Marlie, glaring at her in a way that would have sent more timid souls running for the hills. Marlie just returned it right back to him.

"I do not recall asking for your opinion on the matter!" he snarled.

"No. You didn't," Marlie replied, unfazed. Out of the corner of her eyes, she could see Lupin staring in a horrified fascination, amazed to see someone so casually backchatting the notorious Severus Snape and thus far, not being torn apart.

Snape for his part had gone pale, and was staring at her, biting his lip, eyes bulging, fists clenching and unclenching, clearly wanting to let rip at her, but some indefinable force holding him back.

"You... you.... you, Miss Lovegood, are the most insufferable, stubborn, arrogant student ever to pass through the doors of Slytherin while I've been its Head!" he finally managed to spit out.

"I refuse to believe I'm more arrogant than Malfoy," Marlie returned.

Lupin was now watching through his fingers, and had he not been a teacher, he would almost certainly have been taking cover round about now.

Snape took in a deep breath and held it, reminding Marlie of a volcano about to explode. For a fleeting moment, she wondered if perhaps she'd gone too far. However, she was proved wrong. Severus Snape did the unthinkable... and backed down.

"A written account of what happened... on my desk... by morning!" he seethed at her, before turning and striding out. As he made his way out of the hospital wing, they could hear him shouting at some poor Ravenclaw for breathing in the wrong way, or something equally innocuous.

Slowly, Marlie let out the breath she hadn't realised she'd been holding, while Lupin finally dared to slide his hands down his face so that only his mouth was covered. Marlie turned round, her heart still pounding, and looked at him, biting her lip. Their eyes locked for the second time that day, and the effect was electric. As one, they began to smile, and then giggle, before bursting out into full laughter.

"Oh my god," Lupin managed to force out. "Marlene Lovegood, what have you done?"

"He's going to kill me," Marlie whispered, drying her eyes. "Oh gods, his poor afternoon class, they're going to hate me so much." She composed herself. "Oh dear. Ah well, never mind, maybe I can get Tyler to sweet-talk him. She's good at that." She looked at her professor again. "Sorry, sir. I think I may just have complicated your life again. He's not going to do anything to me; he's known my mum too long, and he's not got enough friends to be careless with them. But I think he might take it out on you instead."

Lupin seemed unbothered. "Probably," he agreed. "But as he'd already made up his mind to dislike me long ago, I don't see it making much difference now. Don't worry about me, I shall be all right. You go back

to your dorm and rest; Madam Pomfrey says you're to avoid excitement for the rest of the day. She's already written you a sick note for your afternoon classes."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Now off you go. I for one think you've had quite enough excitement for one day."

Of course, Marlie being Marlie, the last thing she did was to retreat to the Serpents' Nest to lick her wounds. After dropping off her bag, she shifted into her cat form and made for Gryffindor Tower. Once there, she curled up on a chair that smelt strongly of Hermione, and slept.

She was woken two hours later by a squeal of joy as someone swept her up into their arms. That someone was, of course, Hermione.

"You came back!" Hermione cried, clutching the cat to her chest.

Marlie purred, although she would also quite like to be able to breathe, if the truth were known. Fortunately, Hermione seemed to come to her senses and loosened her grip. Sitting down, she placed the cat on her lap and petted her gently.

"My cat came back!" she whispered.

Opposite, Ron and Harry, who had been watching with mixed looks of repulsion and fascination, exchanged glances.

"So it is your cat now, is it?" Harry asked. "Not going to track the owner down or anything?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. I spoke to Marlie Lovegood earlier, and she reckons the cat's quite capable of making its own decision about where it wants to be. I'm quite happy sharing."

"She would say that," Ron muttered. He indicated the cat, which had looked up sharply at his words and now appeared to be glaring at him. "So. Does it have a name yet?"

"Haven't really thought about it," said Hermione, tickling under the animal's chin. "Come to think about it, I'm not even certain whether it's a he or she."

"In that case, you'd better find out," said Ron, getting up and plucking the cat out of Hermione's arms before either girl or cat could react, and turning it over. However, before he could get anything like a good look, he dropped the cat, crying out in pain as blood dripped from his hand. The cat, meanwhile, dropped neatly to the floor, landed perfectly on all fours, and was soon back in Hermione's lap, meowing indignantly.

"It scratched me!" Ron protested, frantically looking for something to soak up the blood.

"I'm not surprised," Hermione replied crossly, handing him some tissues. "I wouldn't be too pleased either if you'd tried to look up my skirt."

"I was just trying to find out what it was!" Ron pouted. "Honestly, Hermione, it's a cat, not a human!"

As always, it was Harry who stepped in to prevent a disagreement becoming a war.

"Maybe there's a magical way of finding out," he suggested. Hermione's eyes instantly lit up, as illumination made her forget she was angry with Ron.

"Of course!" she laughed, reaching for her wand. "Revelo Sexualis!" The charm hit Marlie, causing her to panic momentarily, but she needn't have worried. All that happened was that a green Venus symbol appeared, a circle with a cross underneath.

"Girl!" Hermione laughed. "I knew it!"

"That narrows it down, then," Harry noted. "Not Buster, Rocky or Garfield then."

"Why don't you call it Evil?" said Ron bitterly, still nursing his hand. The cat spat at him, and Hermione glared.

"Ron. Be sensible."

"Don't forget the three am rule either," Harry put in. "It has to be something you can shout out of the door at three in the morning and not feel like a complete moron."

By this time, they had attracted a crowd. The other Gryffindors in their year had surrounded them, curious to see what all the fuss was about.

"Call it Kitty," Dean suggested.

"Dean, that's so boring," said Lavender, rolling her eyes. "That cat's clearly posh, she should have a royal name, like Princess or something."

The cat purred at that, clearly liking the idea of being addressed as royalty.

"In India, we call our cats after precious jewels," said Parvati, shaking her hair. "Call her Sapphire, after those beautiful eyes."

"How about Banshee?" Seamus suggested. "Trust me, it's sometimes difficult to tell the difference." The cat wasn't so pleased with that idea, almost seeming to be frowning.

"Sukey," Ron threw in. "It's what the Lovegood house elf is called, but it might suit a cat as well." The cat mewed in alarm at that one.

"Snowy."

"Tinkerbelle."

"Snowdrop."

"Fluffy."

"No!" said Harry, Ron and Hermione in unison. None of them could ever hear the name now without shuddering, not after their first year. The cat didn't seem too pleased either.

"How about Blackie?" Dean suggested. "It could be ironic, like."

The silence that followed and the looks from his fellow housemates, not to mention the cat, told its own story and the idea was quickly laid to rest as Harry hastily threw in another suggestion.

"What about Grimalkin, or Pyewacket? They're common witch cat names."

"Salem, perhaps," Ron added. "Or Dagon. Or Cthulhu."

"Ron, I'm not naming my cat after a demon god," Hermione warned him. "A wizard in California did that once. He called its name five times, and the actual demon appeared and nearly caused the end of the world. Although he did live on a Hellmouth, so maybe that made a difference..."

"How about Jinx?" Seamus suggested, changing the subject. "Lots of cats called that."

"My grandmother had a cat called Kismet," Parvati said.

"Mine had one called Jezebel," said Ron. "It was a right little fiend."

"Why don't you call it Crystal?" said Lavender. "Or better yet, Belladonna."

Hermione picked up the cat, looking at her thoughtfully. A hush fell as the gathered Gryffindors sensed that a name was imminent.

"My grandmother had a white cat once," she said, considering her options. "Well, she had three, and they always seemed magical to me. Two were male, and called Pangur Ban and Mogget. But the third was female, and named after one of the great queens of ancient times." She looked into the cat's eyes as she announced the name. "I'll call her Cleo."

"Cleo?" said Dean. "Not very original..."

"But it's a nice name," said Lavender. "And it does suit her."

The cat itself simply yawned, as if wondering what all the fuss was about, curled up in Hermione's lap and went to sleep. Hermione, petting her indulgently as the gathering broke up, smiled down at Cleo. The cat was hers now, and nothing could take that away.

Cleo. She called me Cleo. It was hardly credible that one of the most talented and intelligent witches in her year, with the minds of the entire Gryffindor third year to help her brainstorm, could come up with such an unoriginal name. But she had and

now Marlie was stuck with it. Still, it could have been worse. Hermione could have taken one of Ron's suggestions...

Three days had passed since the argument with Fred and the resulting fall-out (or fall down, if you wanted to be really literal about it), and physically, Marlie was well on the way to recovery. The accident had caused quite a stir amongst the Slytherins, with Michael and Draco

both approaching her separately and offering in low voices to dish out appropriate punishment on the Gryffindor fool who had dared hurt (even inadvertently) one of their kin. Fortunately for Fred, Marlie had been able to persuade them both that it had been an accident, and the worst of the rumours had died down. However, Marlie could not help but be aware that an undercurrent of suspicion was still circulating, which meant that any attempt at reconciliation with Fred would only start the rumour mill turning all over again. It was a shame, really. She'd always liked him. Still, there were other men out there. In the mean time, Marlie did what she always did when things got rough. She threw herself into her Quidditch.

"You've still got it, haven't you?" Laetitia noted as they entered the girls' changing rooms after that afternoon's session.

"Damn right," Marlie answered cheerfully as she stripped off her practice robes. "Just because I wasn't on the first team doesn't mean I've been idle."

"Apart from the time you spent Petrified," Kat pointed out.

"That doesn't count!"

"What's it like being Petrified any way?" Summer asked.

Marlie shrugged. "Nothing, really. One minute you're up near the library looking at this giant snake in a mirror, the next you're in the hospital wing and a week just vanished without you even realising it."

Laetitia shook her head. "Lovegood, how do you do it? You're like a magnet for trouble."

"Natural talent," Marlie grinned. However, the smile soon left her face as she realised Kat and Summer had both beaten her to the two shower cubicles. "Damn. I bet they'll use all the hot water too."

"Undoubtedly," said Laetitia, unworried. "Which is why I'm off to use the Prefects' Bathroom. Be seein' ya, Marls." She gathered her things and left, leaving Marlie sitting alone, wondering why it was Prefects got all the perks.

At length, the other girls finished, and Marlie finally got into the showers. To her surprise, the water was still warm. Calling an answer to the other girls as they left, she prepared to indulge herself.

The changing room was empty when she finally emerged, wrapping a towel around herself and preparing to dry off. Reaching for her wand, she prepared to cast a few Hair-Drying Charms.

It wasn't there. Marlie's blood chilled in her veins. When she went into the shower, it had been in her bag, handle just poking out of it so she could find it without getting water all over her things. There was no way it could have fallen out. It was just possible one of the girls had taken it for a laugh... but unlikely. You didn't mess around with someone else's wand. It was far too personal. Frantically, Marlie dried her hands off and began to rummage around in her bag. Maybe it had slipped down somehow.

"Looking for this?" a man's voice echoed from behind her, deep and hoarse. Marlie spun round, too shocked to speak. But he was too quick for her. Before she could even look at him properly, he'd hexed her.

"Compulsio Anima!" The hex hit her full on, sending her flying backwards, the towel falling from her, but her modesty preserved by the fur sprouting everywhere as he forced her into her Animaga form. Hitting the wooden bench behind her, she sat dazed briefly, before coming to her senses and trying to run.

However, the moment of hesitation had cost her. The intruder had changed shape at the same time she had, and the dog she'd seen the other night was now leaping at her. This time, it had no intention of backing away. Before she could cross the room, the dog had reached her, and pinned her to the ground with a paw almost as big as her head. It was now snarling at her.

Let me go, damn you! she swore as she struggled to get free. The dog was having none of it. He tightened his grip, digging his own claws in, nipping at her skin, although they weren't sharp enough to do much harm. Those teeth, on the other hand, looked deadly.

Leave it, little kitten, he snarled. You are in no position to argue at the moment, are you now?

Go to hell.

Been there, done that, the dog seemed to laugh. Now, I think it's about time you and me had a little chat, don't you think?

What do you want? Marlie at the moment was too shocked and furious to remember to be scared. But there was a part of her mind doing a lot of calculating, and the odds did not look good. So although she wasn't exactly frightened, she was more than prepared to cut a deal if she had to.

Want? I want a lot of things. Revenge. Freedom. A damn good seeing to. But seeing as you're a little young for me, I'll settle for a little favour.

Marlie knew enough to know that little favours were frequently nothing of the kind. Particularly when they were being demanded at tooth point.

What, and you'll let me go if I agree? And how do I know I can trust you? I don't even know who you are!

The dog paused then, a strange expression in its eyes, which Marlie could now see were not brown at all as she'd first thought, but a very deep shade of blue.

My friends call me Padfoot, it answered, and there was sadness in its voice. But the moment was short-lived.

And you, little kitten? What do you go by?

Of course, Marlie had no intention of handing over her real name, although he'd surely find it out sooner or later; she was hardly unknown around school after all.

They call me Cleopatra.

I bet they do, Padfoot snorted derisively. And a lot of other things too, I bet. Seen your type before, Cleo. Lost my virginity to one as it happens.

That says a lot more about you than it does about me, Marlie retorted.

He growled at her. Careful, kitten. You want to ever get that cat skin off again, you'll be quiet and listen. Now. You ever heard of a family called the Weasleys?

Oh, had she ever. What's it to you?

Padfoot chuckled. Temper, temper, Cleo. Now, there's about seven of them isn't there? Six boys and a daughter.

Perhaps. Listen, I'm not doing anything to hurt them! They're my friends!

Really. He did not sound convinced. And the one who pushed you down stairs the other day, is he your friend too?

Shut up! You don't know what you're talking about! Marlie hissed, struggling again now. She'd had just about enough of that incident as it was.

Hmm. Well, if you say so. But forget him. Do you know his brother, the tall, lanky one? The one who doesn't wear glasses.

Ron. The answer came out before Marlie could stop herself. Marlie cursed her luck. There went secrecy.

Yeah, sounds about right. The kid with the pet rat.

A rat? Marlie, if the truth be known, hadn't really paid attention to the Weasleys' pets. But wait a second. There was a rat, wasn't there? Hadn't Percy had one years ago? But it must have died ages ago; rats didn't live more than five years at most, surely? That rat had been in

the family before she'd even started Hogwarts, and it had been in the family a while then.

They did have a rat, she said dubiously. Years ago. But it's dead now surely?

Padfoot shook his head, a strange energy dancing in his eyes.

Not so, little kitten. There is more to that rat than meets the eye. That rat and I go way back. We have... he licked his lips, unfinished business. I want that rat, Cleo. But thing is, I'd attract too much attention wandering around as a dog, and as for using my human form, that's a little inconvenient at the moment. You on the other hand blend right in. So here's what I propose. You help me out, and bring me that rat. Alive, if possible.

Marlie had not missed the implications of the last phrase. This man was ruthless, and a man like that was not to be trusted. What's the catch? There's always a catch. Why'd you want a rat? And why would a human wizard and Animagus be interested in a schoolboy's pet? And then it dawned on her. She and Padfoot weren't the only two Animagi on campus.

The rat's an Animagus too? That would explain the longevity.

Quite so, Padfoot confirmed. And he lives up, or down in his case, to his Beast. He's a nasty piece of work, kitten.

And you want me to go after this dangerous Animagus, do you? Marlie replied sceptically.

Yep. But don't worry. You have three things on your side. Firstly, that his entire future safety depends on him not being exposed as an Animagus. Therefore he is highly unlikely to assume his human form. Secondly, that he is a craven coward and will not fight if he can run. Thirdly, he's one of the most inept wizards I've ever met, and if he hadn't had us, he'd never have made Animagus. If it comes to a straight fight, you will probably win if you bear in mind two things: he's a cunning little bastard and he doesn't fight fair.

That's OK. Neither do I.

Padfoot's lips pulled back into what could be described as a smile. You know, kitten, you and I are going to get along famously. Stepping back, he let her get up. He now looked almost apologetic. Listen, Cleo, I'm sorry I scared you earlier. I don't really want to hurt you, but I couldn't think of any other ways to get you to listen.

You could have tried talking to me? Marlie suggested sarcastically. At the back of her mind, it occurred to her to make a bid for freedom... but she was still trapped in her animal form for the remainder of the hour, and besides, her curiosity had been piqued. Padfoot was dangerous, powerful, and more than a little crazy... but at the same time, he could be friendly, and her instincts were telling her that he was not evil at heart. While she didn't exactly trust him, maybe they could work together. Sorry, kitten, he was saying sheepishly. Like I said earlier, it's kinda inconvenient for me to use my human form at the moment. I don't really have a lot of allies right now, and besides, my social skills are a tad rusty.

No kidding, Marlie sniffed.

Quite. Anyway, point is, will you help me? That's all I want you to do, get the rat and bring him to me. Padfoot whined a little, gazing at her with what could be aptly described as puppy-dog eyes. Go on, say you will. Please?

And what if I say no? Or if I go away and don't do it?

Padfoot grinned back at her, tongue hanging out. Well then, little kitten, I shall just have to go back to my original plan. And perhaps your house head and your parents might also be getting an anonymous little note informing them that their lovely daughter is an illegal Animaga. Unless of course you're fully registered...?

The silence told him all he needed to know.

No. Thought not.

Nor are you, Marlie pointed out. Padfoot just laughed.

Been checking up on me, have you? Smart kid. But believe me, kitten, getting done for illegal Animagism is the least of my worries. I, mate, have got absolutely nothing to lose. So, will you help me?

Marlie thought it over. She didn't think he'd hurt her, not now, but it wouldn't take long to find out who she was, if he didn't know already. And the last thing she wanted was her parents finding out about her talent, or worse still, Snape. Of course, hunting down one illegal and dangerous Animagus on behalf of another was hardly safe either. However, the thought occurred to her that if Ron Weasley's rat really was an illegal Animagus on the run, wouldn't she be doing everyone a favour if she got rid of it? And if Padfoot was wrong and the rat was perfectly ordinary, then she'd be off the hook anyway, and Padfoot would just have to go away.

All right. I'll do it. But on one condition, she said, halting Padfoot's leap of joy. That if the rat turns out to be a normal rat, the deal is off. Also, that's all I'm doing. I'll bring you the rat. Once you've got it, we're done, finished, and you go on your way. Is that clear?

No worries, mate. Padfoot seemed to be inordinately pleased with himself, tongue hanging out, eyes shining, tail wagging. Do you mean

it? You'll really help me? Padfoot, having got what he wanted, now didn't seem to believe it.

I said yes, didn't I? Marlie countered.

Well, yeah. But...Padfoot's mood became sombre as he stared into space, the light going out of his eyes. It's just I've been on my own for so long, I wasn't expecting anyone to actually want to help me. I thought I'd have to do it all myself.

The sadness in his body language, and the pathetic gratitude in his eyes were almost enough to break Marlie's latent defences. Almost.

Don't get too carried away. I'm only helping you to get the rat. Nothing else, understand? I'm not doing anything else for you, I'm not spying or hurting anyone, or

bringing anyone else to you. Just Ron Weasley's rat. And if that rat turns out not to be your Animagus mate, then the deal is off. In return for which you are going to pretend you never saw me as an Animaga. It's just business, understood?

Understood. The gratitude faded away, and when Padfoot met her eyes again, they were as hard and cold as they'd ever been. Marlie briefly wondered if she'd done the right thing - after all, a pathetically grateful Padfoot could be far more easily manipulated than a hard and bitter one. However, she didn't want to encourage him. This was business, nothing more; in fact, not to fine a point on things, it was blackmail. Still, she'd wanted an adventure. Seemed like the Fates had decided to oblige.

Chapter Fifteen The Awful Truth

Of course, Marlie had no intention of keeping her end of the bargain if she could help it. However, she was curious. Was Ron Weasley's rat really an Animagus in disguise? Or was Padfoot as untrustworthy as he looked? The answer was probably obvious. However, she had to make sure. Padfoot would almost certainly track her down again if he didn't hear from her. They'd established methods of indicating to the other if they wanted to meet, and a secret rendezvous point near the Whomping Willow, and it was clear he was expecting her to do something. So Marlie took to spending as much free time as she could spare hanging around the Gryffindors in her role as Cleo the cat.

However, there was one tiny problem. Ron was very protective of his rat, which Marlie found out was called Scabbers, and normally left him in his dorm. Occasionally, he had the rat with him in the common room, but usually in a pocket, making it difficult for Marlie to get a good look (or sniff) at him. Then came the breakthrough. It was one otherwise unremarkable afternoon, while the three Gryffindors were doing their Astronomy homework, watched over by Cleo, who was having great fun spotting the errors in Ron's work ('please don't tell me he's got Gemini next to Scorpio. He has, you know. And what's that? The Moon? Going retrograde?? Moron. And that's not seriously Orion, is it?' etc). Then Ron happened to notice that Cleo was sitting on top of his bag, the better to look over his shoulder at his notes and quietly laugh at them.

"Hermione, get that cat off my bag! She'll squash Scabbers!"

Hermione reached out and reclaimed her cat, loudly declaring that if Ron was going to leave his bag on the table, taking up all the room, instead of putting it on the floor like any normal person, he deserved anything he got. The cat, however, had gone very still as Ron had said the rat's name. The rat was in that very bag? Spellbound, Marlie watched, as her intuition was proved right. Ron put the bag on the floor, opening it to check on Scabbers, who woke up, apparently none the worse for having had a cat sit on him, poked his head out and sniffed the air. Then froze, and slowly turned to face Marlie.

Cat and rat stared at each other. Marlie inhaled, testing his scent for all it was worth... and sure enough, Padfoot was right. Underneath the

dominant aroma de rat, was the telltale scent that marked him out as another mage like her. Animagus, male, late thirties... and scared out of his wits. He had a nose too, and he knew what she was.

Hardly surprising then, that as she broke her trance and pounced, the rat was scurrying away, leaping up Ron's sleeve. Ron scooped up the rat and held him safely out of Marlie's reach.

"She knew!" Ron yelled, ears pink with fury. "That bloody cat knew Scabbers was in there. It heard me say it!"

Hermione for her part had gathered Cleo in her arms and was glaring back at Ron.

"She did not!" Hermione snapped. "She just saw Scabbers stick his head out of the bag! Ron, she's a cat! They hunt rodents! She can't help that!"

"Yeah, well, she can leave this one alone," sulked Ron. "Scabbers is mine."

Marlie settled back in Hermione's arms, eyes not leaving Scabbers. So Padfoot was right. Ron was unknowingly harbouring an illegal Animagus in hiding. That complicated things. It meant she'd have to capture him for Padfoot after all. She still didn't trust the canine Animage, but he did appear to have been truthful so far, and this rat Animagus seemed even less trustworthy. Really, she'd be doing Ron a favour getting rid of him. And so she resolved to hunt this animal down. Backing away, she started planning.

Unfortunately, Ron seemed to see right through every one of her ideas. Over the next few weeks, he took great pains to keep Scabbers well away from her, despite Marlie's best efforts. So it was that a few days before Halloween, Marlie was forced to admit to Padfoot that she'd made little progress.

To her surprise, Padfoot wasn't bothered.

Tricky little bugger, isn't he? Trust him to masquerade as a kid's pet - kids adore their pets. Used to have a pet myself, as a matter of fact. A little grey rabbit called Bunny - look, I was six, I wasn't very good at thinking up names, all right? - which I found abandoned as a baby by the side of the road. Lovely little thing, it was. He used to sleep on my pillow at night, and follow me around during the day - The dog looked up, noticed Marlie staring at him, and hastily changed the subject. Never mind. Point is, kids get very attached to their pets, far more than most adults. No wonder you're having problems, kitten. Don't let it get to you.

Marlie blinked.

You're not annoyed?

Padfoot laughed. Don't be daft, mate. If it were that easy, I'd have got the little blighter myself by now. Nah, I'm just glad you're helping.

Marlie felt oddly pleased at this, a little warm glow burning inside. Padfoot was pacing around, clearly thinking.

No, Cleo old girl, what we need is a change of plan. We need to team up properly, you and me. Tell me, does Ron take that rat outside the common room much?

Now and then, Marlie replied. But the rat's not been well lately; apparently it's lost a lot of weight, and its fur's falling out too. And it's always stressed out when I see it, although to be honest, that's usually because I'm trying to corner it.

I bet it's bloody stressed, Padfoot muttered. Knows I'm after it, that's what it is. Go on, you were saying it's ill.

Exactly. Ron's taken to leaving it in his dorm a lot more than he would otherwise. He'll have it in the common room, but he's not taking it to meals anymore. Reckons the noise'll upset it.

Padfoot looked up at this, grinning. Brilliant. Go and get it while Ron's at lunch.

I can't! Marlie snapped. They all go to lunch at different times, don't they? There're people around, including Ron's three brothers. I think they might intervene if they saw me sauntering out with Ron's pet rat in my mouth, don't you?? Only time they're all out is while they're watching Gryffindor play, or at a feast. And might I add that during the next Gryffindor match, I'm playing?

Padfoot was still grinning. During the match, yeah... but isn't it Halloween soon?

Three days time. Marlie suddenly realised what he was getting at. You think we could sneak in while everyone's at the Halloween feast! Brilliant!

Aren't I? Padfoot beamed. All we need is the password for this week - reckon you could get me that?

Already know it - it's Who Dares Wins, Marlie purred, delighted with the way things were working out. They had a plan. It only remained to carry it out. Things could only go horribly wrong from here.

And so it was that Padfoot, aka one Sirius Osiris Kalderash the Black, aka Sirius Black, found himself running up the main stairs at Hogwarts, heading for Gryffindor Tower, tracing the way as if it were only yesterday he'd been a student there.

It was still guarded by the Fat Lady. Sirius smiled grimly to himself at the thought that things hadn't changed. All he had to do now was get inside - and with the current password, that should be a piece of cake.

Slinking up to the portrait, he changed into his human form and turned on the charm.

"Evenin' love," he grinned. "Who Dares Wins. Can I come in? I'm feeling nostalgic."

The Fat Lady did nothing of the kind. As soon as she laid eyes on him, she shrieked in a way that would have made Marlie proud.

"Get out! Get away!! Murderer! Traitor! Get out, get out, get out!!"

Oh hell. Sirius hadn't banked on this. Trust McGonagall to have told the portrait what he looked like.

"Look, I just need to get in and pick something up that belongs to me," he begged, starting to get desperate. "Please, will you stop screaming and listen??"

The Fat Lady ignored him, or more likely hadn't heard him. She was screaming at an eardrum-bursting rate. Sirius began to panic.

"Look, shut up, will you??" he hissed, hitting the picture frame. "Just... shut... UP!!!" It was to no avail. Reaching into his coat, he produced a Muggle carving knife that he'd liberated from someone's kitchen a few weeks ago.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!!!" he screamed, slashing at the portrait with it. The screams turned to sobs and cries of pain as the Fat Lady took

flight. In the distance, he heard a thud, and a cackle that could only be Peeves.

"Christ, this is all I need," Sirius moaned to himself. Changing back into Padfoot, he raced for the stairs and the exit. Pettigrew would have to wait.

Meanwhile at the Feast, Marlie was almost too nervous to eat. She was almost wishing he'd taken her up on her offer to go with him, but he'd told her not to worry, just go to the feast and enjoy herself. Enjoy herself? Hah! While the noise level in the Hall meant that she couldn't hear anything outside, she could hardly take her eyes off the teachers' table, dreading the moment that Filch would come in, get Dumbledore or McGonagall, and haul them out to help apprehend Padfoot. But it didn't come. The feast passed by entirely without event, and as everyone started to file back to their common rooms, Marlie finally began to relax. Had he made it? It certainly seemed that way. Maybe she could put this whole thing behind her, and get on with her life. Maybe... until, as they were reaching the Nest, Snape came racing down the corridor.

"WAIT!!" he bellowed. "Shut the door, Miss Vetinari. None of you are going in. You're all sleeping in the Great Hall tonight."

The outcry started at once.

"WHAT??"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Why are we sleeping in the Great Hall?"

"What will we do about beds?"

"What will we wear?"

"My hair!"

"My robes!"

"My teddy bear!" This last was said, then immediately bitten off and followed by, "Er, it's a were-teddy. It's called Fang, and it's very scary. Um."

"Sure it is, Nott, and I'm a Mudblood..."

"QUIET!" Snape thundered. "You will ALL go back to the Great Hall NOW and you will do so without arguing or asking stupid questions. Your needs will be taken care of when you get there. Now MOVE!"

No one spoke twice when Snape was in that sort of mood. Not even Marlie dared answer back. As one, the silenced Slytherins turned and made their way back to the Great Hall.

Here, they found the tables cleared back and makeshift beds set up for them. Members of the other houses filed in looking similarly bemused, with the notable exception of the shell-shocked Gryffindors. Marlie in particular was not slow in noticing this, and with her heart in her mouth, tagged along behind Ginny as she sought out her brother.

"Ron, what happened!" she gasped. "Why are we all in here?"

It was Hermione who answered.

"When we got back to our common room, someone had tried to get in!" she whispered.

"It's true," Harry confirmed. "We got there and found the portrait on the door had been slashed to bits!"

Marlie felt her heart skip a beat. Only one person would have dared do that, or needed to do. Padfoot...

"Who was it?" she finally found her voice. "Do they know?"

The three Gryffindors turned to her, eyes wide, and Ron finally spoke up.

"It was Sirius Black," he whispered. And that was the moment when Marlie's world went spiralling off its axis and into the void.

I shouldn't be doing this. I really shouldn't be doing this.

So ran Marlie's thoughts the next evening as she went for her rendezvous with Padfoot- no, Sirius, she thought unhappily. Sirius Black, mass murderer, traitor, renegade Auror turned Voldemort's right hand man, ruthless psychopath, widely regarded as the most dangerous wizard in Britain... and she'd been helping him, albeit unwittingly. And yet... he didn't feel like that. Sure, he was hard, cynical and bitter, and certainly capable of violence. But he'd obviously seen bad things in the Aurors, and if you added twelve years of Azkaban to the mix, it was hardly surprising he was cynical. In fact, Marlie was amazed by how normal he seemed. He was also friendly, patient, understanding, occasionally amusing, and when he let his guard down, Marlie could sense this deep well of pain behind the laddish front he liked to keep up. Which was why, instead of doing the sensible thing and running straight to Snape or, more likely, Lupin, or even confiding in her friends, she was keeping the rendezvous. Alone. Without telling anyone where she was going. In hindsight, she would look back and

wonder what the hell she'd been thinking. But at that moment, Morticia was telling her that she should do this, give him a chance to defend himself. It didn't, however, mean she wasn't scared.

She approached the Whomping Willow in her cat form. Sure enough, Padfoot was there, crouching under a nearby bush. He met her gaze as she drew nearer, but didn't react in any way until she was within a few feet of him. So far, so normal. Normally, he would wait for her to address him by name before greeting her and leading her off into the

undergrowth where they'd be less likely to be seen. However, this time, Marlie didn't say anything. What could she say, really? After a pause, Padfoot turned to look at her, surprised.

Hey kitten. What's up? Something wrong?

Marlie couldn't speak. She realised she was shaking all over. How could he just sit there, knowing who he was and what he was after, and act so normally? Rage got the better of her, and loosened her tongue.

You lying, treacherous BASTARD!!! she shrieked at him. That got his attention. Stunned, and not a little hurt, he sat up, ears pricked.

What did I do?? He sounded not unlike Fred Weasley when she'd told him to get lost. Marlie could only hope this wouldn't end the same way.

You said you only wanted the rat!

I did! Padfoot protested. I do! Look, if it's about that portrait, I'm sorry, but it was screaming and I had to shut it up in a hurry - but kitten, I've never lied to you, I swear!

Then why didn't you tell me you were really Sirius Black?? Marlie screamed down their Animagus mind link.

Padfoot froze, staring at her in horror. Marlie stared back at him, still trembling. It suddenly occurred to her what he'd confessed doing to the portrait - he'd attacked it because it was screaming and he wanted to silence it... and that he might not shrink from doing the same to her either. Her fearlessness dissolved in an instant, and she turned to run.

Unfortunately, Padfoot was faster. Before she could even get away, Padfoot had leapt after her and snatched her by the scruff of the neck, holding her like a mother cat would a kitten. Biological cat reflexes kicked in and Marlie felt her entire body go limp. She was caught, and probably doomed. Turning away, diving under the branches of the Willow, Padfoot raced for a certain root and hit one of the many wooden protuberances. To Marlie's shock, the tree froze, and a passageway opened up at its base. And to her even greater shock, Padfoot dived down it without a second glance, taking her with him.

The passage seemed to go on for miles. Despite her desperate pleas for mercy, that she'd do anything, forget she ever saw him, if only he'd

let her go and not hurt her, Padfoot seemed to have gone deaf. Finally, he reached the end, a flight of stairs

leading upwards. Taking them at a run, he raced through the open trapdoor at the end, and burst into a small, dusty room inside a decrepit wooden building. Once it had been a nice, if plain, sitting room. Not any more - the place was in ruins, although it seemed as if someone had been living here recently. There were no windows, and no entrances or exits that Marlie could see, aside from a flight of stairs leading up to the first floor, and the trapdoor through which they'd come, which Padfoot lost no time in closing behind him with a kick of a foot. Then, and only then, did he release her.

Marlie fell to the floor, staggering away. The dog was advancing on her, all friendliness gone now, growling softly, all possible advantages on its side. Except one...

Changing back into her human form, she reached for her wand - but not quickly enough. Snarling, the dog leapt for her throat - changing into human form as he did so.

Sirius Black landed on her before she could reach her wand, knocking her to the floor and pinning her beneath him, grabbing her by the wrists.

"Please, let me go!" she sobbed. "I'm sorry, I won't tell anyone, I swear it!"

"That's right, little kitten," Sirius grinned down at her, looking exactly like his wanted picture, eyes dancing with insanity, pale, gaunt features

twisted with a malignant pleasure, matted black hair as long as hers hanging down either side of his face. "You're not going to tell a soul."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm sorry, please, don't hurt me..." It was to no avail.

"Too late, Cleo," Sirius sighed, with something almost like remorse in his eyes. "You're a pretty little kid, when all's said and done, and I've enjoyed your company, and don't think I'm not grateful for the assistance, but I can't have risk having you blab. Sorry, kitten, but you're number fourteen. Don't worry though, I'll make it quick."

"You'll never get away with this," Marlie whispered through her tears, still not willing to go down without a fight. "When my mother finds out..."

"I'll be long gone," Sirius murmured, reaching inside his coat with his free hand and producing his knife. At this, Marlie lost it completely, breaking down in tears, begging and screaming, babbling incoherently for mercy. And then Sirius uttered the words that saved her life, and his sanity.

"Say your prayers, little Malfoy. Send my regards to little Draco. I'll pass my condolences on to Narcissa for you. Your dad, on the other hand, can go to hell."

Marlie stopped crying and opened her eyes. Finally she locked eyes with Sirius.

"Huh?"

Sirius, poised to strike, hesitated at the evident confusion in her eyes.

"You know, your dad," he said, frowning. "Lucius Malfoy."

Numb, Marlie shook her head. "My dad's a Muggle," she whispered.

Sirius blinked, as if trying to process this new information. "But... I thought..." he said, bewildered. Slowly, he lowered the knife, and Marlie began to breathe again. Was she safe after all?

"Aren't you Dracaena Malfoy?" Sirius demanded. Now it was Marlie's turn to look confused.

"Dracaena?" she asked. "There is no Dracaena Malfoy. I know Draco Malfoy, Lucius and Narcissa's son."

"Draco?" said Sirius. "But he's dead, surely? Didn't Lucius hand him over to You-Know-Who as a blood sacrifice?"

Marlie shook her head. "If only."

Enlightenment seemed to dawn in Sirius's eyes. "Of course," he said to himself. "Like Lucius Malfoy would ever sacrifice his son and heir. So it was the other twin then."

"What other twin?" Marlie demanded. "Draco's an only child, isn't he? Isn't he?"

"Never mind," said Sirius, frowning at her. "So if you're not Malfospawn, who the hell are you then?"

"My name," Marlie snapped, glaring at Sirius, her fearlessness returning now that she was not in imminent danger of being murdered, "is Marlene Lovegood, daughter of Melissa. And when my mother finds out about this, you are going to be in so much trouble!"

For a moment, Sirius just stared at her blankly, allowing her wrists to slide out of his grasp. Then he did the most inexplicable thing he'd done yet. A smile started to spread across his features, a proper smile of true happiness, and he began to laugh.

"Really? You're Mel's kid? No way!"

"Yeah!" Marlie nodded, starting to smile herself, although that was mostly just to humour this lunatic until she could grab either the knife or her wand and get out of there. "Mel and Leonard's kid!"

"Little Marlie!" Sirius exclaimed, getting off her and pulling her to her feet. He was now looking at her properly, taking in her human form. "I

remember you! You used to come and sit on my lap whenever I visited, demanding I tell you a story and refusing to go to bed until I had. You were, what, three years old? And you used to have this pink rabbit that had been in your dad's family, what was it called?"

"Pinkie," Marlie admitted, blushing. "I've still got him, actually, he's in a box in the loft somewhere."

"In a box in the loft?" Sirius exclaimed. "You used to love that rabbit!"

"That was years ago!" Marlie protested. At this, Sirius's expression changed, and he suddenly looked incredibly sad.

"Yeah," he said, staring at the ground. "Years ago. When I left, you were this cute little three year old I used to babysit, and now look at you. You're a teenager, and..." He suddenly noticed the discarded knife lying on the floor, and recoiled. "Oh God," he whispered, going paler than usual. Raising his eyes, he stared at her in horror, before backing away. Hitting the corner of the room, he slumped down the wall, curling into a foetal position.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm so sorry, kitten. I didn't mean... that is, I didn't know. I... god, what have I done?"

Fingering her wand, Marlie approached warily. She didn't think he'd hurt her now, not with the memory of that little kid who used to beg him for stories and piggyback rides, and insist he help her build dens. She remembered now a mysterious Uncle Siri who used to come and play with her and Michael, but who'd gone away one day and never come back. An Uncle Siri with long black hair tied in a ponytail, a gold earring

in one ear, wearing black leather trousers and Led Zeppelin t-shirts, and with striking indigo eyes. It was hard to square that with the half-starved, filthy, ragged stranger now before her, cowering in a corner and shivering with revulsion at himself.

"Padfoot," she began nervously, dropping to her knees as she sat next to him. Sirius stopped her mid-sentence.

"Don't," he said, in a hollow voice devoid of emotion. "How the hell you can bear to be in the same room as me after what I just tried to do to you, I don't know. I'm so sorry, Marlene. I... look, you'd better go. Go and get your teachers, or your mum. Tell them it's OK, I won't put up a fight. I'll come quietly. I don't value freedom that much. It's not worth..." He drew a deep breath, and let it go, abandoning the sentence he'd been about to start. "I was prepared to silence Lucius Malfoy's brat," he said in a deathly monotone. "I can't hurt Mel's kid." He leant his head against the wall and shut his eyes. A tear started rolling down one cheek. "It's over, kitten," Sirius breathed, sounding like he was in pain. "The game's up. This... it's the end." He lowered his head, sitting hunched up, utterly undone. Marlie inhaled, realising that she was seeing a man who truly had lost everything, a man who had finally, truly been broken. A man who was actually asking her to turn him in, hand him over to what would be certain death or worse.

"No," she heard herself say. "No, it's not the end."

Sirius looked up sharply at this, eyes as captivating as she remembered.

"What do you mean?" he said, his voice losing that awful dead feeling as a tiny bit of what could have been hope crept in.

"I mean, it's not over," Marlie repeated. "Not until you tell me what the hell is going on!! I mean," she continued, "everyone reckons you're this big, bad mass-murdering psychopath ready to kill everything in his path. Then you actually turn up, and at first you're all mad, bad and dangerous to know, but when I agree to help you, you're

actually grateful. Then you're all friendly and understanding and patient with me when I don't get anywhere, which is not how evil guys usually act. Then when I do find out you're actually Britain's Most Wanted, you do the expected thing, drag me off to who knows where and try to kill me, but as soon as you find out I'm not who you thought, you let me go and ask me to turn you in! I don't get it. I really don't get it. And I think you owe me an explanation."

Sirius had been watching her all through that, nodding in agreement. When she finished, he couldn't help but let out a laugh.

"Yeah, I suppose I do, don't I?" Sirius smiled. "God, when you put it like that, I seem completely mad, eh?"

Marlie shook her head. "That's just it! You don't seem unhinged at all! Desperate, yes, at your wit's end, yes, but you don't seem insane! It's like there's a reason behind everything you do, but without the full story, it doesn't make sense. I still don't know what that rat Animagus has to do with anything, for a start."

As she said this, Sirius started giggling.

"What?" Marlie demanded. "What's so funny?"

Sirius shook his head, wiping his eyes. "Nothing," he managed to get out in between snorts of laughter.

"Nothing?" Marlie snapped. She raised her wand at him. "Sirius Black, unless you tell me what you find so amusing RIGHT NOW, I swear I will hex you!"

Sirius slowly pulled himself together, turning his laughs into coughs. "Sorry, kitten, it's just... It's just like old times, isn't it? Here you are, monopolising my attention, refusing to go until I've told you a story." Here, his expression changed and he started leering at her. "You can

sit on my lap too if you like." However, he soon shut up when he saw the look Marlie was giving him.

Glaring at him, she picked up the remains of a stool and changed them into a beanbag cushion with a flick of her wand. Settling herself down, she stared him down with all the icy disdain she was capable of, which was not a small amount by any stretch of the imagination.

"I am quite comfortable here, thank you," she sniffed haughtily. "Now I do not have all night. Get on with it, Black."

"Bloody hell, you sound just like your mum when you do that," said Sirius, shaking his head. "Scary. Anyway, it all started back during the war, when I was one of Her Majesty's Aurors, and my best mate and his wife were forced to go into hiding. You probably know of them - James and Lily Potter."

"Harry Potter's parents," said Marlie, amazed. Sirius nodded.

"That's them, except they weren't at the time, but I'll come to that later. Anyway, they were both top-level researchers at the Ministry, working for the Department of Mysteries. Lily in particular had made some amazing discoveries - she was a brilliant witch. But she was also Muggle-born, and that made her vulnerable. One night as she was preparing to leave work, some Death Eaters tried to abduct her. Nearly worked too, except a mutual friend and I happened to choose that exact moment to walk out of the pub opposite. Needless to say, the three of us together managed to fight them off and we got her home

safely. Pro- James hit the roof when he heard, swearing bloody murder down on them. Took Moony, Lil and I all night to calm him down."

"Moony?" Marlie asked, feeling her necklace twinge. For some reason she couldn't place, that name seemed important.

"Eh, just an old friend," Sirius said dismissively. "Not important here. Anyway, James finally calmed down, but he insisted Lily go into hiding, as she was clearly a target. But she refused to go. Said she didn't want to leave her life behind. Well, they started arguing, and Moony's looking at me like it's my responsibility all of a sudden. Guy always did hate violence, won't even eat meat because he reckons it's cruel. Anyway, then it occurs to me. Somewhere safe and out of the way, with a huge library and massive collection of magical artefacts and heirlooms for them to research, wards and defences like you wouldn't believe, and most importantly for Lil, her best mate since childhood called the place home."

"Tal-y-Rhys Manor!" Marlie gasped. It was common knowledge that Harry and his family had lived in close proximity to the Tylers, but it was still interesting hearing it from the point of view of someone who was actually there.

"You got it," Sirius grinned, before looking at her oddly. "You know the Tylers, then?"

Marlie nodded. "Are you kidding? Deanna's my best mate!" At that, Sirius started.

"You know Deanna!" he whispered, a strange look in his eyes. His features softened as he said the name. "How is she?"

"Good," said Marlie. "Just got made a Prefect. Wants to be an Auror. She's got this rather worrying habit of sleeping with a bladed weapon under her pillow though. And she had a black belt before she'd even started Hogwarts."

Sirius looked impressed, although there was an odd hunger in his eyes. "She always did want to fight monsters. She's good then?"

"She's the best," said Marlie with pride.

"That's my girl," Sirius whispered to himself. "So anyway, you wanna hear the rest of the story?"

Marlie nodded. This was starting to get interesting.

"Well, there we were, me, James, Lil, Caitlin, little Deanna and Caitlin's mum, Medea Tyler, also known as Lady Tal-y-Rhys, Queen of all she surveys, She Who Must Be Obeyed, and anything else that sprang to mind whenever I was trying to get on her good side. Mostly though, I called her Dia. And fortunately for me, she had rather a soft spot for me and didn't mind. And that was home for two years. Lily got pregnant not long after moving in, along came little Harry, and life was just perfect. It was one of the happiest periods of my life. And then..."

"And then?" Marlie asked.

"I blew it," said Sirius, his head bowed.

"It was three days before Hallowe'en," Sirius said quietly, as if Marlie was no longer there. "Harry had just had his first birthday that summer, and Deanna had had her third a few weeks before that. It was 1981, and there didn't seem to be an end in sight to the war. I was out having a quiet get-together - stop looking at me like that, I am capable of just having a few quiet drinks sometimes, you know!"

Marlie sincerely doubted this, but chose not to comment. After all, wasn't the story just getting to the good bit?

"Anyway, it was just three of us, me, Moony, and another old friend. He was called Peter Pettigrew, although we called him Wormtail. See, we'd been at Hogwarts together, and we'd got these little nicknames. There was Moony and Wormtail, like I just said, I was Padfoot, as you know, and James Potter was Prongs."

"Prongs," said Marlie, wondering if he was joking.

"That's right. Stop staring at me like that; there was a perfectly good reason. While we were at school, we'd all learnt to become Animagi. And like you, we'd done it by fifth year - are you fifth year? You must be at least fifteen, and you said Tyler bach had just been made Prefect..."

"That's right," Marlie confirmed. "I'll be sixteen in November."

Sirius raised his eyebrows at this, grinning. "Ooh. Legal! Heh-hey! The boys at Hogwarts must be forming a queue right now. I pity your boyfriend." He paused and reconsidered. "Actually, screw that, no I don't, I envy the bugger."

Marlie blinked, hoping he wasn't implying what she thought he was. Definitely time to get this conversation back on track.

"You were going to tell me what the nicknames meant."

"Wha- oh yeah. Those. Well, Prongs was because he was a stag, after his antlers, see? That, and our juvenile teenage minds thought it was the height of hilarity to bestow a name with a possible filthy double meaning. Moony wasn't actually an Animagus, he was a werewolf, full moon, hence Moony."

"A werewolf?" Marlie interrupted, somewhat horrified. "You were mates with a werewolf?" Sirius caught the intended meaning and gave her a sharp look.

"Yeah, what about it? Look, kitten, he might be a savage beast three days of the month, but the rest of the time, he's human just like the rest

of us. It is not his fault he is what he is, right? When he's not a wolf, Moony is the kindest, sweetest, gentlest bloke you could ever meet. Like I said earlier, he would never eat meat because he thought it was cruel to animals. He hates violence in all forms, although oddly enough he's very handy in a fight, and has a mean right hook. Used it on me once, although it was just after Full Moon, and I did deserve it." Sirius frowned at her. "But anyway. You leave lycanthropes alone, their lives are hard enough."

Marlie looked guiltily away. "Sorry," she said, chastened. "From now on, I promise to be nice to any werewolves I meet, unless it's Full Moon and they're trying to kill me. OK?"

Sirius smiled. "Thank you. Now where was I, oh yes. Wormtail and Padfoot. If you know your folklore, you'll know that Padfoot is another name for the Grim, the demon dog of legend to which I bear a passing resemblance. And Wormtail..." Here, a shadow settled over him once more. "Wormtail was so called because his tail looked like a worm. Wormtail, kitten, was a rat."

"Scabbers the Weasley rat," Marlie whispered. "So that's why you're after him."

Sirius smiled grimly. "You don't know the half of it yet. We were close, we four, closer than brothers. But the war changed all that. My Auror work meant that there were things I wasn't allowed to talk about, and things I wouldn't talk about. Prongsie had Lily to look after, and his work was hush hush as well. Moony was unemployed most of the time, because of his condition, but he was studying at this Muggle college to become one of their mind healers, as well as doing a lot of magical research on the side into Dark Creatures and how to overcome them. I think he was hoping to find a cure for lycanthropy, poor sod. Mind you, who knows, for all I know he's succeeded by now, and is making a fortune out of it. He was poor, but Prongs had plenty of cash and helped look after him, and he was enjoying his work. And Wormtail was doing a low-level clerical job with the Accidental Magical Reversal squad. I knew he hated it, but what else could he do. Aside from the Animagism, and I hasten to add we helped him with that, he wasn't really that strong a wizard. Harmless, really, or so I always thought." He gave a short, bitter laugh. "More fool me."

"What did he do?" Marlie asked, enthralled.

"Wormtail, like I said, wasn't strong himself. He was the kid who always hung around with stronger wizards so he didn't get picked on, always getting in with the strongest wizards around. At Hogwarts, that was us. But afterwards, when we all started drifting apart, the war was in full swing, and Moony, Padfoot and Prongs didn't seem invincible any more..." He looked up, and Marlie shivered to see how haunted he looked. "By the early Eighties, Marlie, the strongest wizard around was You-Know-Who."

"Wormtail joined the Death Eaters," Marlie gasped. Sirius nodded.

"Yeah. Only I never found out until it was too late." Sirius hung his head, staring at the floor. "Until he'd used me to get at Lily and James."

"You told him where they were," Marlie realised.

"Yeah," Sirius laughed bitterly. "Although that wasn't the problem. The problem was, I told him how to get in."

"So how is Prongs anyway?" Peter asked Sirius, who was busy lounging on Remus's sofa, Butterbeer in one hand, lit cigarette in the other, trying to avoid getting ash on the already thread bare carpet.

"He's cool," Sirius replied, too busy looking for an ashtray to notice the odd look on Peter's face. Remus might have warned him, but Remus was too busy answering the door to some Muggle trick-or-treaters, chatting to them and passing out sweets, not all of which were of Muggle origin. "Living the high life on Tyler Island. You wouldn't believe that he's meant to be on the run, would you?"

Peter shook his head with a smile. "No, you wouldn't. Still, that's our Prongsie for you. And you, are you enjoying life there?"

Sirius grinned, having found the ashtray, and lifted his beer up in a toast. "Life, my friend, is good." Sirius had been calling the Tyler house home for the best part of three years now. He'd always refused to say why, but it was common knowledge that he'd had a crush on Caitlin Tyler, and after Caitlin disappeared, most people now believed that he'd simply transferred his affections on to her mother, who had been eager to console herself with a younger lover after her loss. It wasn't actually true, but only five people knew the real truth, and Peter wasn't one of them. Peter, like the rest of the world, believed that Sirius Black and Dia Tyler were an item.

"Your older woman's taking good care of you, is she?" Peter grinned. Sirius winked back at him.

"Wormtail, old son, let me just say that life in the bedroom department is running very nicely indeed right now. And people who look down on us toyboys are just jealous."

Peter and Sirius shared a knowing look, before Peter pushed himself out of the beanbag and came to sit next to Sirius.

"Sirius, there's something I've been meaning to ask you for a while," Peter began.

"I'm not gay," said Sirius instantly. "And those rumours that me and Moony are shagging are all lies."

"Of course," said Peter, concealing a smirk, "But that's not what I wanted to ask. Padfoot, Tyler Island, is it safe?"

"Safe?" Sirius snorted. "Course it's bloody safe! Some of the wards on the place are centuries old! It's a place of natural magical energy! Time itself is its guardian! Wormtail, there ain't no safer place in the country, except maybe Hogwarts."

Peter smiled, outwardly relieved. "That's good to hear. But are you sure there's no loopholes? No little get out clauses? You know these places of power, they look safe, but there's always one little weakness, one little chink in the armour, and I just wanted to make sure..."

Sirius dismissed his concerns. "Wormtail, I'm tellin' ya, there ain't none. Place is solid. Well, there is one legend, but I'm sure it's not true really."

"Legend?" Peter pricked his ears up. "What legend's that then?"

"Oh come on, you know the one."

"No I don't. What is it?"

"You know, the one about the blood of a Malfoy," Sirius started to say. He noticed the polite look of incomprehension on Peter's face. "You really don't know it, do you?"

Peter shook his head.

"Oh well, in that case..." Sirius extinguished his cigarette and sat up. "They say that if the mind of the Lady is set against you, there is no way in or out of the place. It's her stronghold, her power centre, fortified by time, blood and family law. She is the ultimate ruler there, and no one can gainsay her. No one... unless they bring with them the blood of a Malfoy. The Tylers hate the Malfoys and all who serve them. Murder one of them, and sprinkle the blood on the gate, and the place'll open up and admit you as a friend, whoever you are. That's the only way for non-family members to get in if the Lady doesn't like you. But seeing as the Malfoys work for the only person who'd want to force a way in, it's not gonna happen. Come to think of it, I don't think anyone's ever got in that way."

"No, suppose not," said Peter thoughtfully. "Thanks, Sirius. Thanks for putting my mind at rest. I was worried."

"No worries, mate," Sirius yawned as Remus closed the front door after waving goodbye to the trick-or-treaters. "No worries at all."

Marlie stared in horror as he finished. There was no need now to ask what happened. Blood of a Malfoy, Dracaena no longer being around, Sirius assuming (wrongly) that Draco had been a blood sacrifice... it all made a sickening sense to her now.

"Lucius Malfoy sacrificed his own daughter to get Voldemort into Tal-y-Rhys Manor," Marlie said bleakly. Sirius nodded.

"Yeah," he whispered. "Peter went straight to You-Know-Who and told him what I'd said. I arrived there on Hallowe'en night, and saw the body on the ground. Didn't check to see what sex it was, so I assumed it was the boy, Draco. Then saw the open gates, and the Dark Mark above the ruins of what had once been my home..." Sirius buried his head in his hands, unable to say anymore. Marlie looked away until he was ready to speak again.

"I knew then what he'd done. Knew that the little rat had betrayed me. Who else was it? No one else even knew. Course, I didn't know then that Cait, Harry and Deanna had survived, or that You-Know-Who was gone. If I had, who knows; I might be a free man now. I know I'd never have gone after Pettigrew if I'd known Cait and the children were OK. Doesn't matter now. All I knew was that the house was destroyed, and the people I cared about most in all the world were dead." Again, Sirius seemed unable to speak. Marlie heard him sniff as he wiped an eye. Gods, to come home and think that your entire family, everyone you

loved had been murdered... She couldn't imagine it. But she could imagine wanting revenge.

"So you went to find Pettigrew, to get revenge." She frowned, trying to work out what happened next. "According to Mum, you killed Pettigrew after he tracked you down, claiming you'd gone over, and took all those Muggles with him. But if you'd never gone over, if he had been the traitor all along..."

Sirius was smiling that grim, joyless smile again. "It was him who cast the spell, not me. Didn't think he was that powerful. Evidently the Death Eaters taught him a thing or two. Killed all the Muggles around him, destroyed his wand and severed his finger in the process, but the little rat escaped. He changed shape and escaped down the sewers, leaving me behind."

"Mum said that you were just sitting there laughing when they came for you," Marlie recalled.

"True, and she'd know, she was there," Sirius sighed. "Marlie, after the night I'd had, my sanity was near gone. I was sleep-deprived, betrayed, grieving, and to cap it all, I'd just been framed for murder. I had to laugh, because it was either that or cry, and buggered if I'm crying in public."

"God," Marlie whispered. "And that's how you ended up in Azkaban." Sirius nodded.

"That's how."

"But how'd you get out? And how'd you survive, that place is said to drive people mad within weeks!"

"As to that, my dear kitten, the answer to both is the same. Animagism. I soon worked out that if I was in dog form, the Dementors didn't affect me the same. They can't see, so they didn't know what I was doing. That, and I knew I was innocent. It gave me something to cling to, that one day I might get out, might clear my name. It wasn't much... but it was enough."

Marlie stared at him open-mouthed. "And then you escaped."

Sirius grinned. "Yep. That fool of a Minister left his newspaper for me, and what do I see but my old friend Wormtail on the front cover with his

new family? So I made my plans, and one dark night when the Moon was new, I changed into Padfoot, wriggled out of the cell window - one of the bars had been loose for ages, I just hadn't seen the point in taking advantage before, dropped down to the sea and swam ashore. Then nearly dropped dead of exhaustion on the beach. But I lived. And I was a free man."

"And you looked up Caitlin Tyler," said Marlie.

"I did. Of course, I wasn't fool enough to reveal myself to her, not while the kids were there anyway. I watched. I waited. I ingratiated myself with them in my tres cute Animagus form. I was even able to persuade Deanna to let me through the wards."

"And then they went back to school, and you snuck in to try and talk to Caitlin," said Marlie. Something occurred to her. "You hadn't lost track of time at all, had you? You knew exactly what day it was. You wanted them out of the way so you could talk to Caitlin in private. And it was never Harry you were hunting either - it's Pettigrew the rat you want. He's the one you meant when you were saying 'He's at Hogwarts'."

Sirius grinned, confirming everything she'd said. "Yep. You're not just a pretty face, are you, kitten?"

Marlie shook her hair back, smiling proudly. "Nope." Somehow, she managed to miss the strange look in Sirius's eyes as she did so. "So, what exactly happened at the Tyler house anyway? From what I heard, you trashed the place."

"I didn't trash the place!" Sirius said indignantly. "It's just that Caitlin, for some reason, wasn't very pleased to see me, and starting flinging hexes around. In the ensuing battle, I found myself weaponless and with a pissed off Caitlin Tyler in between me and the door. In that situation, it seemed best to make a hasty withdrawal and the only route out appeared to be through the window, which was inconveniently closed."

"I bet," Marlie giggled. "So after that, you quit while you were behind and went to Hogwarts. Where you ran into me."

"Yeah." Sirius's depression returned with a vengeance. He covered his eyes, turning away. "Where I almost murder an innocent girl, who also happens to be the one person who actually tries to help me." He couldn't even bring himself to look at Marlie now. "And there the story ends, unhappily ever after. Sirius Black gets caught out, and now Marlie Lovegood's going to call in the Aurors and get him carted off back to Azkaban where he belongs. You might as well, kitten. All I had going for me was the fact that I was innocent. Now that's gone. I tried to kill you. I would have done, if you'd not said you weren't a Malfoy."

"You tried to kill Dracaena Malfoy," said Marlie softly. "Not Marlie Lovegood. There's a difference."

Sirius finally looked at her, and Marlie flinched to see tears freely rolling down the cheeks of this man who hated anyone seeing him cry.

"Not thirty seconds later, there wouldn't have been!" he screamed at her. "You would have been dead either way! And what if you had been Dracaena Malfoy?? What would she have done to deserve it? What did she do to deserve what did happen to her?" He let out a sob, and hid his face in his hands. "Just go," he wept, so softly he could barely hear her. "It's over. I'm done for. No point... no point going on." He turned away, closed his eyes and leant his head against the wall, features screwed
up

in pain. Marlie watched as another sob wracked his body. Inside, she felt a well of pity for everything he'd gone through, being betrayed and abandoned by everyone he loved, forced to spend twelve years in an earthly hell for something he never did. And now to see this once proud and handsome man so totally broken... She could take it no more. It wasn't fair! And she wasn't going to stand by and watch while a good man died and that stinking little rat went free.

"Sirius." She said his name softly, so softly he didn't appear to notice. So she got to her feet, flung her hair back, tried her best to summon a little of the power that Luella drew on when she used her Glamoury, and repeated herself, louder this time.

"Sirius!" This time it worked. There was no question of him not having heard her. Her voice fairly rippled with authority. Surprised, he looked up, and gasped as he saw the fire in her eyes.

"It's not over," she said, anger and a steely determination behind every word. "You and I, we're going to write the next chapter of this story. We're going to find that little rat, we're going to expose him for the treacherous git he is, and we're going to clear your name! So I don't want to hear another word about how it's over! Because it is not over until the Aurors shoot you down, or throw you to the Dementors! While you are still alive and ensouled, there is no way I am giving up on you! So don't keep saying it's over. Because it's not! It's so not! It's so - "

She stopped, noticing that Sirius was looking up at her, staring at her in rapt fascination. His face was still streaked with tears, but he was smiling, indigo eyes shining. Slowly he got to his feet, still staring at her.

"You mean it?" he whispered. "You really mean it? You know... and you'll help me? Without me having to force you or blackmail you or anything?"

"Yeah," said Marlie, a wave of confidence building up inside. She smiled up at him, shaking her hair again. "I'll help you, Sirius. In any way I can."

Sirius bit his lower lip, which had suddenly started to tremble. His entire face began to crumple, and for a split second Marlie wondered if she'd said the right thing. Then he stepped forward, snatched her in his arms, and pulled her close to him, burying his face in her hair. She felt him squeeze her tight and heard him begin to cry in earnest now, running his hands through her hair as he wept on her shoulder. She began to feel rather uncomfortable - nothing had ever prepared her for having a grown man who also happened to be a wanted criminal crying in her arms. Relying on her instincts, she put her arms around him in return, and did her best to comfort him. It seemed to work, because he soon calmed down and loosened his grip, lifting his head up to look at her.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, his voice coming in ragged gasps. "I didn't mean to... you know. I'm not normally like this, it's just... you're the first person in twelve years to look at me like I'm a human being." He faltered, tears springing to his eyes once more. This time it was Marlie who pulled him back into her arms, patting his back and soothing him tenderly - until she got a good look at the state of his clothes. Nose wrinkling in disgust, she pushed him away, revolted.

"Sirius Black, when did you last have a shower??"

That had him. "Er...?"

"Oh gods," Marlie grimaced. "Sirius, if you have to think about it, it's been too long! And when were those clothes last cleaned?"

"Cleaned?"

"Argh!" Marlie stared down at her hands and robes. "And you just touched me! Oh my god, that is gross!" She began frantically dusting her robes.

"What?" Sirius demanded, somewhat put out. "I've been living rough, I've had other things on my mind! And as a matter of fact, I had a shower at Caitlin's. There, I can remember."

"That was two months ago," Marlie whispered, disgusted at the thought of what Sirius might have been doing since.

"So? It's just a bit of dirt," Sirius protested, brushing ineffectually at his clothes, which had once been quite a nice suit, but were now the perfect epitome of Tramp Chic.

"Sirius, there are things living in that," Marlie grimaced. "God, and to think those clothes have been next to my hair!" She grasped it in despair. "I swear, I am not going to stop showering for the next week."

Sirius just rolled his eyes. "Bloody hell, women! All that fuss over something as trivial as how often I wash."

"Let us get one thing clear," said Marlie icily. "Rule number one about hanging around with me. Personal Hygiene is Important, and it is not optional!" She sighed, thinking up a plan. "All right, all right. Listen, meet me by the Whomping Willow at ten at night in three days time. We can start working out ways of getting the rat later, but before we do anything else, we have got to get you cleaned up and into some decent clothes."

Sirius grumbled a bit at this, but did not protest. If the truth be known, he was at heart almost as vain as she was and secretly hated looking so scruffy. Particularly in front of Marlie.

"All right, you win," he sighed. "Make me over."

Marlie smiled. She always liked to have a project to work on. Glancing around at the inside of the room which she now realised was the inside of the famous Shrieking Shack, she decided that Sirius wasn't the only one in need of a make-over. In between cleaning up Sirius Black,

turning the Shrieking Shack into something out of the IKEA catalogue and hunting down Wormtail, this was going to be an interesting year.

Chapter Sixteen The Evil That Men Do Lives On And On

Of course, the night of Sirius's abortive attempt to sneak into Gryffindor Tower had caused trouble for more people than Marlie. On the same night that Marlie was confronting Sirius, Remus Lupin was dealing with some confrontations of his own.

"So you've had no communication with him at all, then?" Kingsley Shacklebolt asked, staring intently at Lupin.

Lupin shook his head. "No," he replied, keeping calm despite the repeated questioning. Logically, he didn't really blame them for interrogating him; after all he was just about their only lead. He just wished they'd take his word for it. "I've heard nothing from him. I certainly had no idea he was planning to sneak in to Hogwarts, although I knew he was in the area."

"How did you know he was in the area?" Kingsley was not slow in picking up on this, more out of desperation than real belief that Lupin actually knew anything of use.

"It was in the Prophet a few weeks back," said Lupin, calmly. "Dumbledore briefed us all at the time. Mr. Shacklebolt, I hope you're not suggesting that the Headmaster has been in secret contact with Black?"

Both of the two Aurors in front of him laughed at the idea.

“No, of course not,” Tonks grinned. Her smile faded as she realised just how little they had to go on. “Please don’t blame Kingsley, Remus, he’s just annoyed by how little progress we’ve made.” She turned her eyes on him imploringly. “Remus, are you sure you’ve told us everything you know about him, everything that might help? I mean, you used to be one of his best mates, and if there’s anything you know that could help us find him, anything at all...”

Lupin hesitated. His conscience told him that he should tell her what he’d so far kept to himself: that Sirius Black was not just a supremely talented wizard, but also a secret Animagus. But part of him refused to let him do it, the part that still remembered the nights when Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs ran wild across the countryside, untrammelled and free, together as one, closer than brothers. The part that still couldn’t fathom how Sirius had gone bad, couldn’t think what on earth would have prompted Sirius to turn on his loved ones like he had. And so he kept his silence.

“No,” he said. “There’s nothing.”

Sighing, Tonks and Kingsley exchanged looks and turned to go, bidding Lupin goodbye. Tonks gave him one last look before she left.

“If you think of anything later, or something comes back to you, you will let us know, won’t you?”

Lupin nodded. “I will.” Apparently satisfied, the Aurors left. His next visitor, however, was not so easily put off. As soon the Aurors were gone, Severus Snape strode into Lupin’s tiny office.

“Can I help you Severus?” Lupin asked, getting up to greet his colleague. Lupin always made a point of being unfailingly courteous no

matter how others behaved to him. It was guaranteed to drive Snape up the wall. That night was no exception.

"Aurors done with you, are they?" Snape sneered at him.

"Aurors Tonks and Shacklebolt have left my office, yes," said Lupin, feeling oddly like the compere at a Muggle rock concert.

"And from the looks on their faces as they left, may I assume that you're still claiming to have no knowledge at all of our little escapee?" Snape asked, prowling around behind Lupin. Fighting the sudden urge to sit down, Lupin remained where he was. He had no intention of letting Snape intimidate him if he could help it, even if the Beast had suddenly become uncharacteristically submissive all of a sudden.

"That's right, Severus," he replied, his voice neutral.

"Really." A pause. "Surprising, don't you think?"

"Why is that?" Lupin asked mildly, ignoring the hairs pricking up on back of his neck. I am a grown man, not some misbehaving schoolchild, and I will not let him frighten me!

"Interesting, don't you think, that the four of you were always so close at school?" Snape mused, pacing up and down behind Lupin. "Not one of you could so much as breathe without the other three knowing about it. And now, twenty years on, you're telling me that the last surviving two don't know where the other is or what they're doing?"

"I've not been in contact with him for twelve years, Severus," said Lupin through gritted teeth. "Last time I saw him was three days before that Halloween... and he was the same as he always was, getting his Doc Martens on my sofa, filling my flat with cigarette smoke, telling filthy jokes and drinking me out of house and home. Exactly the same as he'd done a million times before. It was the same as it always was. Then he went home, got arrested four days later, and I haven't seen him since."

"That's what you'd like us all to believe, is it, werewolf?" Snape spat out the word, the venom he'd been holding in since his entrance finally breaking through. Lupin flinched at the word, the part of him that still cared deeply for Severus curling up in pain. He was unable to repress a shiver as Severus's hands grabbed his shoulders and forced him

down, back into his chair. Lupin gasped as his knees gave way beneath him, despite the explicit instructions he'd given them to resist Severus's efforts. It was almost as if part of him wanted to be intimidated.

Severus was right behind him now, leaning down so his face was right next to Lupin's ear.

"You look so innocent, don't you, Lupin?" he murmured, in the sultry tones that had had hundreds of pupils quivering in their boots. "The shy, quiet intellectual, mild-mannered Remus Lupin, good word for everyone, calmly going about his daily business with not a care in the world. Except we know differently, don't we? We know, you and I, what really lies behind that façade of yours, don't we? We know that underneath that sweet natured persona lie the uncontrollable urges of the Beast!" At this, he spun Lupin's chair around, so that Lupin was now staring directly into the black pits that were the windows on to Severus's soul. Lupin was transfixed. If he stared too long into that fathomless abyss, he'd be lost forever, he knew; yet he couldn't look away. He couldn't fight the treacherous Beast's sudden yearning to drown in darkness, to seek oblivion in Severus's unholy gaze.

"What's the matter, Lupin?" Severus pouted, trailing a bony finger down Lupin's cheek. "Nothing to say?"

Lupin didn't answer. While his eyes never left Severus's, his attention was drawn entirely to that fingertip tracing a pattern on his face, a finger that could either caress... or hurt. At the moment, Lupin wasn't sure what he'd prefer.

"What do you want, Severus?" Lupin managed to whisper.

“Want?” the other man sneered. “I want to know what you’re really thinking when Black’s name is mentioned. I want to know what secrets you’re hiding. I want to know whether you shiver in revulsion at the deaths he caused... or in pleasure.”

Lupin pushed his chair back against the desk, horror breaking the spell Severus had woven.

“I would never take pleasure in the death of another!” he gasped, shocked that Severus thought that little of him. My god, Lupin realised, he truly doesn’t see me as human any more. The realisation of what he’d known rationally for years finally sunk in. Severus’s face was contorted in sheer loathing.

“Liar,” he hissed, grabbing Lupin’s face in long-fingered hands that had known more than their share of violence in their time. The nails bit in to Lupin’s tender flesh, leaving a constellation of crescents that would ensure Lupin didn’t dare leave his rooms until morning. “Three nights a month, you live for death, don’t you, Beast?”

“Severus, I -“ Lupin began. Severus didn’t listen.

“Three nights a month, you are just... like... him!” Severus raged.

“That’s not true!” Lupin shouted. Despite his fear and upset that a once close friendship had come to this, he wasn’t about to let Snape get away with that. “I never chose to be what I am!” Eyes narrowing, he allowed his gaze to shift imperceptibly to Severus’s left forearm. “I had darkness thrust upon me before I’d even reached my teens, Severus. Unlike certain others, I never walked into it of my own free will.”

Severus snarled at him, a primal sound that had nothing human in it. Taking firm hold of Lupin’s face, he dragged him out of the chair and

hurled him to the floor. As Lupin began to sit up, Severus stood over him, wand out, his hand trembling.

"My past... has nothing... to do... with this!" he seethed, barely keeping control of himself. By this time Lupin's Beast had finally decided to assert itself.

"Nor has mine, but you will keep dragging it up," Lupin snapped. "Tell me, Severus, what's more evil, a beast who kills because that is its nature, or a man who kills and tortures because he enjoys it?"

"Shut up," Severus rasped, his face twisted almost beyond recognition. Lupin ignored the warning signs.

"How many were you responsible for, Severus?" Lupin taunted him as he staggered to his feet. "Twenty? Forty? Fifty? One hundred? More? Face it, Severus, you were a worse monster than I'll ever be. Changing sides when it suited you won't take that away."

"When it suited- Lupin, you have no idea," Severus snarled, advancing on the unyielding werewolf. "No idea what I have lived through."

"Whatever has happened, you have brought it on yourself, Severus," said Lupin primly. Damned if he was going to let a former Death Eater accuse him of being a monster. "In that respect, you and Sirius have far more in common with each other than either of you do with me."

Severus's eyes widened as he inhaled, and Lupin instantly knew he'd gone too far. Severus looked just as he had done when Marlie had spoken back to him... except this time, Lupin knew that the volcano would not back down and take it out on someone else. This time the Slytherin Vesuvius would blow its top, and he was directly in harm's way. He wasn't wrong. With an incoherent roar, Severus reached back and struck Lupin square in the jaw. The werewolf fell back, sprawled on the floor. Before he could react or even find his wand, Severus was on him, pinning him to the floor, deceptively delicate fingers finding his throat and preparing to throttle him.

"Never, ever, compare me to... to that... creature again!" Severus howled in hate, tightening his grip with every word. Lupin, choking, tried to beg for mercy, but no sound came. All semblance of control was gone from the Potions professor now, and as Lupin looked into his eyes, he knew that all that was there was madness. However, he was

soon proved wrong, as a strange gleam began to appear in those lightless pits.

“Would you like to find out for yourself, werewolf?” Severus crooned. “Would you like to know just what I finally brought on myself? Hmm? Would you?”

“Severus, I - ack!” Lupin gasped, his air supply momentarily cut off. Severus just laughed softly, sounding almost feminine, albeit in a cruel, twisted way.

“Ah, my dear, darling wolf,” he murmured, lowering his lips to Lupin’s ear. “You do suffer so beautifully, don’t you?” With his free hand, he reached for his wand and began to trail the tip down Lupin’s chest until it was poised over his heart. “Petrificus Totalis!”

Lupin stiffened under the curse, eyes locked on Severus’s. This was not good. Lupin silently prayed for someone, anyone, to walk in. Where the hell was Dumbledore when you needed him?

“Ever had this on you before, wolf?” Severus sneered, sitting back and gloating. “Ever known that you’re helpless, and completely at the caster’s mercy? Ever looked into their eyes and known that not only are they going to do whatever they like, but that you can’t even close your eyes and look away while they do it?”

Oh dear god. Albus, where are you?? Even a house elf would do. Or an insomniac student. Lupin had no doubt whatsoever that Snape was not joking. Until Snape laughed.

“No, of course you wouldn’t, would you? Remus Lupin, still very much the innocent, thinking he’s so pure and virtuous. A monster I may be, Remus, but at least my evil is my own to use. You don’t have a choice

in the matter.” His eyes glittered in the firelight. “You can protest all you like, Lupin, but the truth of it is that you would have ripped my throat out all those years ago, and not all the pangs of conscience afterwards would have changed a thing. Whereas I could tear you apart, body and soul, right now, if I wanted. Of course, I might feel guilty afterwards and seek to expiate the sin through my suffering. But would it not be easier to simply choose not to do it in the first place?” The fire had gone out of Severus’s eyes, and now he simply looked coldly at Lupin. “I am a man, Lupin. And I choose...” He got to his feet, brushed his robes down and cast the counter charm. Lupin immediately collapsed, breathing heavily, eyes shut.

“I choose not to. There is always a choice, Lupin. Remember that.”

Lupin opened his eyes. There was no trace of either madness or hostility in Severus’s face now. Instead, he was standing a little way away, arms folded, a look of disapproval on his face.

“If you will have me think of you as a man, you will stop being the pawn of fate and start making choices about what you will do, where you stand. Twenty years ago, you made a choice, and you chose Potter and Black over Melissa and me.” His unflinching gaze caused Lupin to look away. “Need I point out to you which ones are still alive, and which either dead or murderers?” His voice lowered, and suddenly Lupin felt the years pass away and it was almost as if they were both boys again.

“Tell her, Remus. Because if you don’t...”

“Severus, please,” the brown haired boy begged. “Please don’t tell her. It would break her heart. I can’t bear to have her look at me like I’m a monster, please...”

The black haired boy snorted, disgusted.

“Except you are.” Severus shrugged off the despair in Remus’s eyes. “Fine, fine, I won’t tell her she’s shagging an animal. You’re right, it would break her heart, and I am not so cruel as that.” His gaze hardened. “You have one month, Lupin. One month. Tell her before the next Full Moon, what you are. You never know, she might even understand. Tell her, and I may consider our friendship to still have some potential.”

“And if I don’t?”

Severus sneered viciously at the desperate boy. “If you don’t, werewolf, then in future I shall treat you as the animal you are.”

“Tell her, Remus,” Severus’s voice whispered seductively. “I know you know something about Black. Something that’s helping him stay hidden. Don’t make the same mistake you did last time. Don’t choose the treacherous murderer again. Choose to work with Melissa and me this time. I can’t guarantee her friendship, and her love is certainly out of the question.” Here Severus seemed to change again. Now he looked actually gentle. “However, if you tell her what you know, I am prepared to offer you mine.”

“Severus, I...” Lupin didn’t know what to say. Was the offer genuine? It certainly seemed like it. However, Lupin knew enough not to take the Slytherin’s words at face value. There was also that wolfish part of him that refused to give up loyalty to a pack mate so easily. With a sinking feeling, Lupin realised the subtext behind Severus’s offer. Shake off your old pack loyalties, suppress your lycan side, choose your human friends, and act like the Beast isn’t part of you, and we’ll accept you again. Not so easy, Severus. All very well to speak of choice, but Lupin had no control at all over what his body did at Full Moon. Lupin could no more cast the Beast out than he could cut off his own arm, and he’d be equally crippled if he did either. No, he would not take acceptance on those terms.

“I told you before, Severus. I don’t know anything,” Lupin said.

Severus said nothing. He didn’t need to. The glare that had snapped back into place said it all for him.

“Fine. Have it your way, werewolf.” With a twirl of his cloak, he was gone, leaving Lupin staring at the floor, wondering if he’d made the right decision.

Someone else wondering if he’d made the right decision was one Sirius Black, three nights later.

“Do you know what you’re doing, kitten?” he whispered as he followed Marlie. They were in the back garden of a deserted Muggle house in a suburb of Glasgow and it was around six o’clock at night. Sunset had been an hour or two ago, and it had been at sunset that Marlie had intercepted him after sending him a message bringing forward their rendezvous time, informing him that she had plans for him. As yet, she was being very tight-lipped on the subject, but so far it had involved waiting until it was properly dark, then mounting Marlie’s racing broom and taking off, heading north to avoid the Dementors on the castle’s approaches, and coming around in a wide

circle to head south, before flying at speeds Sirius hadn’t been aware brooms could actually handle without falling apart. His stomach had yet to recover, and he wasn’t sure his backside ever would. While he wasn’t going to complain about an hour spent clinging on to an attractive blonde, that... Firebox?... was not built for comfort.

“Calm down. We’ll be fine. I can do Memory Charms,” Marlie fingered her wand. Sirius noticed that she seemed a lot more anxious than she sounded.

“Oh good. That makes me feel so much better about housebreaking,” Sirius muttered. “And if the neighbours call the police, then what?”

“Stun and run,” Marlie replied.

“Stun and run- Marlie!” Police officers have always stuck together, and Sirius was no exception. “You can’t do that, it’s wrong.”

Marlie stopped, turning to look at him, arms on her hips.

“Three days ago, you were prepared to kill to stay out of trouble, and now you’re lecturing me on just stunning them?” she snapped. That had him. Sirius was suitably abashed. He looked away, unable to meet the fire in those eyes. For the last three days, he’d been having nightmares of dead schoolgirls and blood all over his hands, but they’d been nothing compared to the visions that had started haunting his days. Sirius Black had always considered himself to be fundamentally one of the good guys. Now he’d crossed over a boundary he never thought he’d ever come close to - he’d almost killed an innocent just to save his own skin. He’d come face to face with his dark side and he didn’t like what it was capable of.

“I didn’t want to,” he whispered. “I just... didn’t know what else to do.”

“Would you have done it? If you hadn’t found out who I really was?” The voice, cold as the night air around them, bit deep into his mind.

“I don’t know,” Sirius breathed, closing his eyes and trying not to remember what had happened. It didn’t work. Although there were no Dementors within miles, the unwelcome flood of memories burst over his mental dams and wouldn’t stop.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were Sirius Black???” Shock panic fear all laid bare don’t know how but she knows who I am, she knows she knows SHE KNOWS! Have got to stop this, got to stop her screaming like this, can’t let anyone know or it’s all over get her by the neck, that’s right, cats can’t resist it, now get her to the Shack before anyone sees, look stop fucking whining and wriggling, or I won’t be able to go through with this, oh god I’ll have to kill her, this is not what I wanted to happen, I don’t know if I can do this, please stop crying, you’re only making this worse! Just a Malfoy, bloody Lucius’s runt, bastard killed all my family, this is fucking payback, right? Loyal Son of the Tal-y-Rhys, she’s the enemy, nothing personal, Dia would have wanted this, after what he did to Cait, that fucking family, all the same, even Cissa really, despite everything, kill ‘em all, world’s better off without them, right we’re here, just rip her throat out before she changes, no crime to

kill an animal, oh bollocks, too late. Have to use the knife, now hold her
still, that's right, ignore the

crying, IGNORE THE CRYING, she's just a Malfoy, just a Malfoy, going to grow up a bitch if she's not one already, that's right, just think of Lucius's face when he finds out his daughter went the same way as his son, although I'd've thought he'd have given the girl away in the first place, although it had D. Malfoy on that Slytherin team sheet I found so this must be her, look just kill her, that crying is getting to me, she's just a Malfoy, just a Malfoy, just do it, get it over with, say your prayers little Malfoy! "Huh?... But my Dad's a Muggle." WHAT?? Jesus, tell me this isn't happening. So who the hell are you then?

Shit. Shitshitshitshit. No. Not little Marlie. Please no. God, it has to be, looks just like Narcissa and if the hair was tied back and she had glasses on... Fuck. Fuck. Oh god. Thirty seconds later and... Stop it. She's not dead, not lying on the floor covered in her own blood, not staring up at me. She's not, she's not... so why won't the image go away?? Please, make it go away, make it stop, I'll take Azkaban again, take the Kiss even, Cait can kill me herself, just make it go away! I didn't kill, I didn't, blood on my hands, murdering bastard, deserve Azkaban, freedom ain't worth this.

"Sirius?" Just stop it. Please. Go and get the Aurors. If you're not here I might not keep seeing you with blood all down your robes. Just go. What are you waiting for?? God, it's getting worse, now I keep seeing the three year old I remember with her throat cut. "I think you owe me an explanation, don't you?"

Laughter, and that horrible corpse disappears. She's so cute when she's annoyed. Just like old times. Standing there with her hair in

Next thing he knew, Marlie had grabbed his hands and wrenched them down to his side. Stealing a glance at her, he saw her biting her lip, wretched eyes, and an aura of overwhelming helplessness.

"Will you please stop that?" she whispered. Sirius could hear the terror in her voice. Poor kid, she's only fifteen. I need to get a grip, she shouldn't have to deal with this.

"OK. OK. I'm sorry." He relaxed his arms, and Marlie let him go. "Maybe I should just go away," he said, folding his arms against the chill November air. "Have my nervous breakdown on my own, and not bother you with it." He turned and made to leave... until Marlie grabbed him by the arm.

"Sirius Black, you are the most bloody screwed up individual I have ever met!" Marlie hissed. "And gods, but you're stubborn! Come on, it is bloody freezing out here, the Warming Charms stop working much below ten degrees, let's get inside. I promised to clean you up, and that is what I'm going to do! You'll feel better after a shower." Her voice softened, and now she seemed almost gentle. "Come on. Change into Padfoot, and let's go."

Slowly, Sirius unfolded his arms. He even found himself smiling. "Oh all right then. You've talked me into it," he grinned, shapeshifting. Marlie smiled with relief as he wagged his tail, looking up at her with his tongue hanging out. God, I must look ridiculous. But she seems to like it. Damn, she looks nice from this angle... Sirius immediately shook himself. What was he thinking? She was fifteen, for god's sake, young enough to be his daughter. He hated to think of himself turning into a lecherous old pervert. Honestly, just because you haven't had sex in a decade, and a pretty blonde smiles at you... Following her across the patio, he waited patiently at the back door as she charmed it open. Then, turning to him, she beckoned him inside.

Psychotic much? Marlie had to wonder, for probably the millionth time that week, if this was such a good idea. They were in the kitchen, and a newly bathed Sirius, dressed in clothes he'd purloined from what could only be the wardrobe of the teenage son of the house, namely jeans, Iron Maiden shirt, red flannel shirt and leather jacket, was having his nearly waist length hair combed and dried. Tidied up and made over, Marlie had to admit that he didn't look half bad. He was still far

too pale and thin, of course, but compared to what he'd looked like before, anything was an improvement.

Right now, he was leaning back, eyes shut, actually smiling. He seemed, for the first time since Marlie had known him, at peace. Of course, it probably wouldn't last. But anything was better than that awful look in his eyes back in the garden. Brushing out his gorgeously silky mane of hair, Marlie wondered once more what exactly was going on in Sirius Black's brain. She knew enough about Azkaban from her mother, and hadn't she experienced Dementors herself on the train? It had been hard enough for the minutes she'd been exposed to it... she couldn't imagine what it had been like for twelve years. Truth be told, she was still a little afraid of him - he had nearly killed her after all. And yet, she couldn't turn her back on him. Marlie was one of those who always had to have a Project to work on... and helping to rehabilitate an unjustly persecuted man was practically a gift. Even if he was troubled, to put it lightly. Still, at the moment he seemed happy enough; almost sane in fact. Certainly not

hallucinating any more, for which Marlie was truly thankful. The thought of him seeing her lying dead was freaking her out more than a little. She put it out of her mind, choosing to concentrate on brushing out that gorgeous hair, running a borrowed hairdryer over it, slowly but surely turning Sirius Black into something out of a Timotei advert.

Finally, she was done. Letting the hair fall down around his shoulders again, she produced a mirror so he could see what she'd done. Opening his eyes, he gazed bleary-eyed into the glass... and sat upright, blinking in shock.

"Fuck..." he whispered, before remembering Marlie was there. "Er... wow. I said wow. Um. Forget I said that?"

Marlie just rolled her eyes. He could be irritatingly moral at times. "Sirius, I do have a brother, you know. I do watch TV well after I should be in bed, I do live in a building full of teenagers. I have heard people swear before!"

"Yeah, but..." Sirius squirmed. "I feel bad. Feel like I'm corrupting you."

Marlie couldn't help smiling. "Too late. Five years in Slytherin already did that."

"True," said Sirius, his eyes still locked on the mirror. "My god, bet that's a first, a Gryffindor worried about corrupting a Slytherin." He turned his head, admiring himself. "Bloody hell, kitten, you're good." He began to scratch his chin. "Now how are you at shaving? Because I want to get rid of this beard."

"I've shaved my legs," Marlie volunteered. Sirius did not look convinced.

"What with, an electric razor or a disposable one?"

"Do you doubt my skills?" Marlie demanded, trying to avoid answering the question.

"In a word, yes."

"I'll be careful! I won't cut you!"

Sirius snorted. "Hmm. Well, normally I'd do it myself, but seeing as you did such a nice job with my hair, I'll trust you. If you can nip back to the bathroom and fetch a disposable razor and some shaving cream? The electric ones leave me with a five o'clock shadow."

Marlie went and fetched the items, along with a towel to wrap round him and catch the stubble. As she parked him near the sink, it suddenly occurred to her what he'd said.

"You've used electric razors?" she asked, intrigued. Sirius nodded.

"Yeah, that's right." He nodded approvingly as she began to apply the shaving cream. "Hang on, kitten, don't shave it all. I quite fancy a goatee."

“You’ll have what you’re bloody given,” Marlie muttered. However, she did leave a goatee shaped area free of foam. “So,” she continued, filling the sink, “you’re not a pureblood then.”

“Nope,” Sirius grinned. “Half-blood. My dad was a wizard. My mum was a Muggle, well, I say Muggle. In actual fact, she belonged to a gypsy clan. Didn’t have any magic herself, but her mum, my gran, was the wise woman for the community. It was her who first realised I was taking after my dad and started to train me up. Course, she couldn’t teach me much, but she taught me a bit of herbcraft, bit of horse whispering, how to read the cards, fixing things magically, how to read and write, stuff that might come in useful.”

“Literacy coming in useful eh?” Marlie remarked, concentrating as she began to shave. “Who’d have thought it? Now hold still, if your chin’s moving, I might cut you. Don’t want that, do we?”

Sirius somehow doubted that keeping quiet would reduce his chances; however he did as she asked and sat there quietly, eyes following her as she turned his head this way and that, carefully raking his skin with the razor, but not hard enough to draw blood. She’s touching me. She’s not more than six inches away from me. Just close enough to reach out and... Sirius forced his mind to think of something else, anything else. What the hell was wrong with him? He’d never gone for teenagers before, not since he was one. Come to think of it, he’d normally ended up linked with older women. This was a new one on him. And yet, he couldn’t deny that the thought of the blonde Animaga finishing shaving him, cleaning him up, then sliding into his lap, wrapping her arms round him, taking off that Muggle t-shirt of hers and pulling his head into her chest was doing very strange things to him. He suddenly became very aware that his jeans were getting rather tight

around the crotch area. Shifting his legs to try and hide it, he just hoped Marlie didn't look down.

Marlie for her part was far too intent on what she was doing to notice. As far as she was concerned, the fact that an aroused adult male was just inches from her was irrelevant. This wasn't erotic; this was art. Oblivious to the way Sirius was staring at her, she continued to shave him.

Until he shifted his legs and threw her off course, causing her razor to move awkwardly and a bubble of blood to start oozing out of his cheek.

"Oh god! I'm so sorry!" Marlie squeaked, grabbing a sheet of kitchen roll and trying to soak up the blood.

"Not your fault," Sirius grunted. "Shouldn't have moved. Get a plaster out the bathroom. A small round one if they have them. These things are never as bad as they look. Go on, go. You're nearly done, I'll finish up here." And hopefully be able to get rid of this bloody hard-on while I'm at it, Sirius added mentally, as he finished shaving himself. Quite where he'd become the type to find schoolgirls attractive, Sirius had no idea, although he suspected the long celibacy and the fact that Marlie was the only woman, no, the only human to even talk to him had a lot to do with it. She was rather sexy, though...

Marlie returned with the plaster, and stopped short as she came in. Sirius had turned to look as she'd walked in, and smiled in greeting.

"Hey!" she laughed, taking him in. "Doesn't that look better? Now that's how I remember you!" She looked him over appreciatively. While the clothes admittedly weren't quite what Sirius would have chosen, they suited him well enough, and Marlie liked what she saw. This was more

like the “uncle” she remembered. It was certainly a start. He was even rather handsome, in a broodingly sexy kind of way, although he didn’t have that jaw-dropping, earth-shattering effect on her that Professor Lupin did. Nevertheless, he was the kind of man she’d be proud to be seen with.

Sirius actually blushed at this, to Marlie’s surprise.

“Stop that,” he said gruffly. “I’m still underweight, have barely seen sunlight since god knows when, and you’re not telling me that my eyes look normal yet. That and I’m old enough to be your father.”

“You look better in jeans than him though,” Marlie purred, sidling up to him. “Tell you what, when we’ve cleared your name, and you’re a free man, you’re going to have every witch in the country after you.”

“Including you?” Sirius asked, hoping he didn’t sound too interested. Marlie frowned and stepped back.

“Please. As if I’d be so shallow. Here, your plaster.” She applied it to his cut, which had already stopped bleeding.

Sirius quelled the sudden disappointment as he dried his face and reached for the mirror. The sight that met his eyes left him lost for words. There looking back at him was a man not so different from the one he remembered all those years ago. Paler and thinner, admittedly, but the hair was clean and trimmed at last, and the eyes, though still sunken and haunted, seemed to have recaptured their old sparkle. He looked... human. He felt human. Felt like more than the monster everyone had treated him as for so long. No longer did he feel like a zombie or a madman, intent only on survival and revenge. For the first time, he realised he didn’t just want revenge on Pettigrew. He really did want to clear his name, truly be a free man again, be the man he was before. He wanted to be able to live, to dream, to love, to be happy.

“Sirius? Are you alright?” Marlie sounded worried. It was with difficulty that Sirius finally tore his eyes away from his reflection to look at Marlie. He met her eyes, saw her standing there anxiously, beautiful blonde hair framing her perfect face, casual Muggle clothes showing off her amazing curves to perfection... Stop that at once! the part of his mind that ever bothered with rational thought scolded him. She almost certainly has a boyfriend, she’s not going to be interested in an old guy

like you. The rest of his mind, however, put the mirror aside, strode towards her and gathered her in his arms, kissing the top of her head.

"It looks great," he whispered hoarsely, fighting tears of joy pricking at his eyes. "Thank you."

"No problem," Marlie replied, uncertainly. Sirius was beginning to unnerve her, although it was at least nice to know he was grateful. However, the fact remained that she'd also like to be able to breathe.

"Sirius," she managed, "you can let go of me now."

Sirius held on to her for a few seconds longer before releasing her, slowly drawing away. "Right. Yeah," he said, seemingly unsure of himself. He was still smiling at her, and was that tenderness in his eyes? "Thank you," he whispered, stroking her hair.

"Um... yeah," said Marlie, disconcerted and not yet experienced enough in matters of the heart to recognise what she saw. It was time, she decided, that they moved on. "Er, let's clean up here and fly into town. Time to go." Turning away, she went to clean up in the bathroom.

Ten minutes later, everything was as it was before they'd arrived, and all the lights were off. Marlie had disappeared into the bedroom they'd taken the clothes from, and appeared to be searching her pockets. Sirius watched with interest.

"Whatcha doin'?" he asked, as Marlie began scribbling a note.

"Apologising for nicking the guy's stuff, although how he'd notice in this mess, I have no idea," said Marlie, sniffing at the stuff covering every available surface. The fact that her own bedroom was equally full of things was beside the point. At least hers didn't smell of stale sweat

and testosterone. She reached in her jacket for her purse and began to produce some Muggle notes. Sirius noticed this and moved to stop her.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"Compensating him," Marlie snapped. "I'm not a thief! Borrowing a razor, shampoo, soap, etc. is one thing, taking clothes is quite another."

"Kitten," Sirius moaned. "His parents can well afford more! Don't pay when you don't have to!"

Marlie turned around to face him indignantly. "Sirius. Your family might not feel ashamed of walking off with anything that's not nailed down. Mine always taught me that you pay for what you own, with money you came by honestly. Well, semi-honestly anyway," she added, remembering the borderline legal businesses she'd been involved in.

"My family taught me that possessions tie you down, and that no one is entitled to more than they need," Sirius returned, equally annoyed. "There's loads of clothes in this house, far more than this family'll ever wear. They don't need them. I do."

"Yes, you do, which is why we're taking them," Marlie flared. "But not without paying!"

Sirius sighed, throwing his hands up in despair. "Fine, fine, have it your way. Your cash after all. But I still think you're a mug."

The two of them snuck out of the house, Marlie locking the back door behind her. Making their way stealthily to the back of the garden, Marlie produced a miniaturised Firebolt from her pocket and restored it to its normal size.

“Going back, are we?” Sirius asked, steeling himself for another nerve-wracking ride.

“Not yet,” replied Marlie. “I was thinking of taking a ride into town. I was going to take you shopping, but I think everywhere’ll be closed by now. Besides,” she said ruefully, looking at her now half-empty wallet, “I’m not sure if I can afford it now.”

“Not too late to nip back in there and get that money out of his room,” said Sirius, his body language all but saying ‘I told you so’.

“No, no, it’s all right, I’ll get more money soon,” Marlie sighed. “Tell you what though, this is going to be expensive, buying you new clothes and kitting the Shack out as well. I’m not going to have much left over for me. I don’t even want to think about what I’m going to buy everyone for Christmas.”

“Kitten, you don’t have to do all that,” Sirius breathed. “I’m used to living simply, I don’t need all this stuff! Really!”

“I know,” Marlie said sadly. “But it would be nice.”

Sirius felt his heart go out to her. He couldn’t have her spending all her money on him, and yet he guessed that she was determined to do it. Reaching into his shirt, he pulled out a piece of stone on a string, with the runes ‘SB’ on it. “Here. Revelo.” The stone shimmered, and changed into something Marlie had no trouble recognising as a Gringotts key. Sirius held it out to her.

“Here you go, kitten. You spend money on me, you use this, OK?”

Marlie stared at it in shock, barely able to form words.

“Well?” Sirius urged. “You going to take it?”

“I, er, well, Sirius, I can’t take this!” Marlie whispered. “This must be all your money!”

“Yeah. And I ain’t using it,” Sirius replied. “Kitten, there’s loads in there, doing nothing except gathering dust and hopefully interest. I can’t get at it, if I go anywhere near Diagon Alley, the Aurors’ll be on me like a ton of bricks. But you can. Don’t worry about it being traced, it’s for one of the secret numbered vaults, and not one associated with my name either. And no it isn’t stolen. It was freely given to me by someone who decided that I needed it more than they did. And now I’m doing the

same, on the grounds that right now it'll do more good in your keeping than mine."

Marlie took the key off him, staring at it in fascination. She hardly dared think about how much there might be in there.

"Aren't you afraid I'll run off with it all, or spend it all?" she whispered. Sirius smiled, shaking his head.

"Nah. Like you said, you're not a thief. If you'll compensate a total stranger who you'll never see again for taking their stuff, you're not going to rob me."

Marlie stared at it, stunned at being given all this wealth to play with.

"Thank you," she gasped.

"Don't mention it. Oh, by the way, tap your wand to it and say Concelo to hide it. Probably best that no one else knows you've got it."

Marlie had to agree. While she had no intention of misusing it, the same could not be said of her housemates if they got their hands on it. So she tried the charm, and watched as it changed back into a stone pendant... except this time, instead of the SB initials, the runes read ML.

"Nice, eh?" Sirius grinned. "It's a security precaution - only the one who owns the key can lift and replace the concealment charm, as indicated by the initials. And while the charm is on it, the owner cannot give it away, nor can anyone else steal it. I also ought to mention that the owner cannot lift the charm under duress. It's well protected, kitten. Long as you don't lose it, of course. My god, I've never panicked so much in all my life as I did that time out fishing on the moat. Thank god

Prongsie thought to use a Summoning Charm on it. Course, we still had to get it out of the carp afterwards..." Sirius noticed Marlie staring at him and hastily drew the conversation back on course. "But never mind about that. Point is, I don't want you spending any more of your hard-earned cash on me. From now on, anything you spend comes out of there. And you can start by compensating yourself for everything you've spent so far. Got it?"

Marlie looked up at him and began to smile, the shock evidently wearing off. "Got it. Thanks, Padfoot, you're the best." Putting the key around her neck, she reached out, put her arms around him and kissed him on the cheek. Sirius's eyes widened at the physical contact, but mercifully, he managed to resist the urge to embrace her in turn and show her what real kissing was like. Instead he settled for a hug.

"No probs, kitten. Now, where were we going? Into town, you say?"

"That's right," Marlie nodded. "You look different enough from your wanted poster to go unnoticed, I reckon. I think we'll be safe."

Sirius did not look convinced. "Do you now. I'm not so sure, I'm not quite that recovered yet. Hang on, lend me your wand."

Marlie did so, albeit reluctantly. It was one of the most personal things you could do, use another mage's wand, and Marlie was a little uncomfortable with the idea.

However, she trusted Sirius not to misuse it. He took it from her and weighed it critically.

"Bloody hell, kitten, how do you do anything with this?" he grumbled. "It's like a twig. Nothing to it, hardly. I mean, it's serviceable enough, I suppose, but it's so delicate, I feel like I'm going to break it."

“If you’re going to be like that about it, I’ll have it back,” Marlie snapped. “I’ll have you know it’s very useful. It’s brilliant for the kind of precision work I use it for.”

“Yeah, I bet,” said Sirius, trying to get a feel for the wand as he swung it around. “It just feels a bit ridiculous in my hands, that’s all. Like a battle-hardened warrior charging into battle with a surgeon’s scalpel in his hand.”

“Still lethal in a fight though,” Marlie observed. “Look, just get on with it, will you? I feel naked without it.”

Sirius grinned, flicking his eyebrows at that remark, although he didn’t say anything. Instead he cast a few Unremarkable Charms around first Marlie and her Firebolt, then himself, before handing the wand back to Marlie.

“There you go. That’ll keep us safe from prying eyes.” Marlie put the wand away and mounted the Firebolt, looking oddly at him. Something had just occurred to her.

“Sirius, do you actually need a wand? It’s just you didn’t have to use one to reveal the key, and I just wondered...”

Sirius mounted the broom behind her.

“As to that, my dear kitten, most of the time, yes. But Auror training and my dear old gran taught me how to harness and focus my powers without one. For simple, short-range spells, all I need is my own hands and brain. Of course, for more difficult stuff, like Unremarkable Charms, it’s best I use a wand, otherwise things could go horribly wrong.”

Marlie decided not to ask exactly what fell under the definition of ‘horribly wrong’. The charms seemed to be holding, and as with most magic, it was usually better to leave well alone. Kicking away, Marlie took off and headed for the heart of the city.

Chapter Seventeen Hungry Like The Wolf

Fortunately for Marlie and Sirius, their deceptions held good. Marlie landed in a dark alleyway near Glasgow Central Station, shrank her broom after Sirius had staggered off it, and the two of them prepared to head into the bright lights of Scotland's second city.

Wrapping her clothes around herself, Marlie headed for a pub she vaguely remembered lunching at with her parents on a holiday a few years ago. Sirius followed close behind - a little too close behind. He was standing right next to her, mere millimetres from her shoulder. Then Marlie felt a hand hook itself around her arm. She glanced up sharply, wondering what on earth Sirius was doing - and realised that this wasn't anything to do with her at all. Sirius was staring at everything around him, drinking it all in... and looking absolutely terrified. He was clutching tightly at her sleeve, his knuckles white with the effort, and Marlie noticed that he was shaking.

"Are you all right?" she asked gently. They were taking an enormous risk being out in the open like this, even in a Muggle street, even with magical concealment. Marlie started to wonder if this had been a good idea.

"Um, yeah," whispered Sirius. "I... there... there's just so much... life!" He flinched as an ambulance raced past, sirens blaring. "So noisy," he whispered, his shoulders subconsciously hunching up.

Marlie cursed for not realising this sooner - after twelve years on a desolate island with only his own thoughts for company, and having lived in the quieter Wizarding World for a good few years before that, Sirius's ability to filter out background noise and other stimuli must be near gone. Hadn't Draco had similar problems when she'd taken him to London before now?

"Come on," she said, not unkindly. "We're nearly there now. Let's get you inside, get you fed. You'll feel better once you're off the street."

Sirius nodded, although his grip on Marlie did not loosen until they were inside the pub, a traditional-style pub that reminded them both of the Leaky Cauldron. Finally, Sirius began to relax.

“Better,” Sirius murmured. “You getting the first round in then?”

“Excuse me, but I will not be getting any rounds in!” Marlie hissed. “I’m underage, in case you’d forgotten.”

“So?” Sirius shrugged. “I’d been drunk at least three times when I was your age.”

Marlie gave him a withering look. “Yes, well, not all of us are drunken wastrels like you were, Padfoot. Now come on. I’ll come with you, but you’ll have to order and pay if you want beer.”

Anxiety struck Sirius might be, but nothing came between him and a beer if he could help it.

“OK, OK,” he sighed. “Let’s go. What are you having?”

“Just a Coke, thanks.”

“You sure? Kitten, you’re with an adult. I can buy you alcohol if you like!”

Marlie grimaced. “Eww. No thanks. Hate the stuff.”

Sirius stared at her if she was out of her mind. “What?? It’s lovely! How can you not like alcohol??”

“Because it’s horrible. Anyway, we’ve got to fly home tonight don’t forget. One of us has to be sober enough to fly, and it’s clearly not going to be you. Right, here’s a fiver, that should cover it.”

“A whole fiver? Not got anything smaller?”

Marlie could only roll her eyes. Clearly Sirius had not grasped the concept of inflation yet. He was going to have quite a shock coming to him.

"I think you'll find it'll be acceptable. Look, the barmaid's seen us. Go and order." Marlie gave him a nudge.

"Er... a pint of lager and a coke please," said Sirius nervously as the barmaid glared at him. Marlie gave him an encouraging pat on the back. This would be the first time he'd done something as remotely normal as this since leaving Azkaban. The barmaid, at least forty if she was a day and with dyed blonde hair and the pallor of a heavy smoker, fetched their drinks, all the while looking suspiciously at Sirius, who clutched at Marlie's sleeve in terror.

"She knows!" he hissed out of the corner of his mouth. "Look at the way she's staring at me!"

"Keep smiling," Marlie murmured. "She might just not like tourists."

"Don't I know you from somewhere?" the barmaid demanded as she returned with the drinks.

"Do you?" asked Sirius, trying to look innocent.

"Yeah," the woman nodded. "Like I've seen you in here before, except you're not one of my regulars. Been on TV lately or something?"

"Er..."

"Yeah," said Marlie unexpectedly. She beckoned the woman forward and lowered her voice. "Can you keep a secret?"

"A secret?" The barmaid's eyebrows raised, and she began to grin. "He is famous, isn't he? I knew it!"

Marlie looked up and down the bar before whispering, "Yeah. He's the lead singer in a band. You've probably seen him in a magazine or on Top of the Pops or something. But he's very shy, and would prefer not to have the entire pub know about it in case someone calls the tabloids or something."

The barmaid grinned slyly at her. "Tell him his secret's safe with me, love. Out of curiosity, who is he?"

Marlie thought fast, before whispering the first name she could think of.

Sirius for his part was still looking ready to bolt, although he relaxed a little as the barmaid turned to him with a smile, waving his money away.

"Oh, don't you worry about that, Mr. Osbourne. On the house to you and your, er...?"

"Niece," said Marlie. "It's my birthday soon, we're having a quiet drink to celebrate before he goes off on tour next week." She flashed her best smile.

"Niece then," said the barmaid delicately. "Well, you enjoy your drinks, and if you need anything else, you just give me a call!" Adjusting her hair and winking at Sirius, she went off to attend to other customers.

Sirius slowly turned to look at Marlie.

"Kitten."

"Yes?" Marlie asked brightly, hoping her grin didn't look too fixed.

"Did you just tell her I was a very famous rock star?"

"Er... maybe?"

Sirius digested this for a few seconds.

"Kitten."

"Yes?" Oh god, he's going to kill me.

"You're

cool."

Half an hour later, the two of them were closeted in a corner booth, tucking into their food. Sirius was attacking a 12oz steak with extra chips and some of almost every sauce they had. Marlie for her part had opted for fish and chips, surprising even herself as she began savaging the battered cod.

"Hungry?" Sirius asked with a grin.

"A little," said Marlie, frowning. "It's just odd how I feel the urge to pick the entire thing up in my fingers and start scoffing it." She poked it with her knife, having already speared it with her fork.

Sirius nodded sagely. "Yeah, that'd be a side-effect of the Animagism. Your animal traits can start manifesting in your human form. Don't worry. It's only temporary until your body adjusts. Unless you spend a lot of time as a cat, of course, which you probably won't. I, on the other hand, am practically living as Padfoot at the moment, so if you walk in on me trying to lick my bottom or something equally unpleasant, you know why."

Marlie dropped her cutlery, disgusted. "Eww! Padfoot! Trying to eat here!"

"Sorry," Sirius grinned. "Rule number one of hanging around with me - develop a very strong stomach." He looked unnaturally gleeful at the prospect of freaking out Marlie on a regular basis.

"Gross," Marlie muttered. She looked him over. He no longer looked anxious - not even concerned now. She decided that she probably could stop worrying about his mental state, for now at least.

"So, you're feeling better then."

Sirius shrugged. "Food does that to me." He picked his glass up. "And beer's even better. You should try some, kitten."

"Will you stop trying to get me drunk? I thought you didn't want to corrupt me?"

"This isn't corruption! This is an important initiation! Everyone should try underage drinking. It's great."

"Yes, well, when I get tired of my stomach lining, I'll let you know, OK? Until then, I shall stay sober. May I take it you're getting used to life on the outside again?"

Sirius lowered his eyes. "I don't know," he said softly. "All that noise, and light... After Azkaban, it's going to take a lot of getting used to. I'm not sure I ever will entirely. All my psychic barriers, kitten, they're near gone. The Dementors had them all. They've been regrowing since I got out, but there's a reason I've been travelling at night, away from built-up areas, and it's not just to keep out of sight. First time I saw a car, I was frightened out of my wits." He pushed his food around his plate. "Sometimes I think I'll never be free of that bloody place," he said quietly.

"Sirius," Marlie whispered, reaching for his hand, giving it a squeeze. "It's OK. You're free. There's no Dementors here. You're in a pub. With food. And beer."

"And you." Sirius looked up, and smiled shyly at her. Marlie blinked, amazed. She'd never had Sirius down as the bashful type.

"You're helping," said Sirius. "You're helping a lot." He withdrew his hand from hers and resumed eating.

"Really?" Marlie asked, feeling rather bashful herself.

"Really," Sirius nodded. He swallowed the peas he'd been chewing. "Thank you."

There was silence for a while, as they both ate. Then Sirius spoke up again.

"Tell you what, kitten, there's something else I can't get over."

"What's that then?"

"How clean everything is!" He waved his fork as he looked around. "I mean, look at this place. We're in a pub in Muggle Glasgow, and I don't feel in danger of my life. No one's started a fight yet. There's no broken glass or bloodstains anywhere. People are actually dressed in nice clothes. There's women in here, and they're not all either built like the back end of a bus or touting for business. And look!" He indicated a group of twentysomething girls all dressed for a night out. "They're drinking wine!" He shook his head as he returned to his beer. "Not just the pub either - the whole town looks posher than I ever remember. I mean, I'm sure it still has its rough parts, but for Glasgow to have any posh bits is a bloody achievement. And all the cars! They're all curved and shiny and clean, and not falling apart. And the names too - what sort of name is Hyundai for a car for gods' sake? Sounds like something from a martial arts film."

"That would be because it's Japanese," Marlie pointed out. "Or possibly Korean."

"Japanese?" Sirius demanded. "People buy cars off the Japanese?"

"Uh huh. My dad drives a Nissan. And my mum used to have a Toyota until my brother drove it into a ditch while trying to learn to drive over the summer. What? Stop being so chauvinistic. They're good cars!"

Sirius shook his head, disbelieving. "Back when I was young, Made in Japan, or indeed anywhere else in the Far East, was shorthand for cheap rubbish," he said quietly. "And you tell me every other car on our roads is built by them?"

"The ones that aren't German or Swedish," said Marlie. "Get used to it, Padfoot."

Sirius put his beer down, eyes despairing.

"God," he breathed. "Everything is so... different! I mean, everything's changed! The world I knew, it's... gone. It's like one of those Muggle time travel stories, where the

hero falls asleep, then wakes up and he's in the future. Or like a Celtic fairy tale, where the hero goes to Tirnanog, comes back and discovers three hundred years have passed and everyone he knew is dead."

"It was only twelve years, Sirius," said Marlie gently. "And they're not all dead, surely."

"They might as well be," Sirius sighed. "I can't get in touch with any of them, because if I tried, they'd think I was a murderer and try to kill me, or call the Ministry. The world has moved on, everyone I knew has moved on, people who were just little kids when I left have turned into teenagers and I've missed their entire childhoods! I wanted to see Harry grow up, wanted to be there for Deanna, and I've missed it all. I wanted to be Cool Uncle Sirius with the earring and the motorbike, who'd slip you sweets and extra cash while your mum and dad weren't looking, and let you do all sorts of dangerous stuff that your parents would have a fit about if they knew. And now I'll never get the chance, because even if I do clear my name, all my friends' kids are too old! And if they're anything like you, they'll all think I'm incredibly irresponsible and immature. Look at you - I offer you the chance to have illicit alcohol, and you turn it down because a) it's illegal and b) you don't want to fly home drunk! Flying home drunk's the best bit!"

"Not when you fall off and break your neck, or crash into a tree or something," Marlie snapped, glaring at him. "Gods almighty, Sirius, who is the grown-up here?"

"Good god, kitten," said Sirius, half bitter, half amused. "You don't half sound like your mum. She was always having a go at me for being irresponsible. Whoever made us partners in the Aurors must have been a sadist."

"Yes, well, I can't imagine partnering an alcoholic thrill-seeker was fun for her either," Marlie hissed. "In fact, I'm beginning to realise how she felt."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Bloody hell, are all the youth of today as uptight as you? What happened to teenage rebellion?"

"Uptight?!" Marlie realised that had come out louder than she really liked, and lowered her voice. "Look, I'm risking Azkaban or expulsion for helping Britain's Most Wanted Criminal. You don't think I'm taking enough risks??"

That shut him up. Sirius realised that she had a very valid point.

"Yeah. You're right." A pause. "I'm sorry." He looked guiltily away.

"Thank you," said Marlie, not entirely mollified but not willing to fight either. "Honestly, I wonder which of us is the adult sometimes."

"I don't feel like an adult," Sirius said quietly. "It's just... I was twenty-six when I went in, you know? I was just starting to put down roots, pick up adult responsibilities, but I was still young. I mean, I didn't feel much different to when I was in my teens, not really. And now, I'm thirty-eight. Thirty-eight, kitten! I'm practically middle-aged! And what do I have to show for it? Nothing! No house, no wife, no kids, no job. I've

not had to deal with responsibility, not had to live and grow up, not been able to develop. The years I should have been learning to be a grown-up, I spent trying not to go out of my mind in Azkaban. I haven't changed, kitten!" he whispered urgently. "That's why I'm worried. The world has moved on, and I haven't. In my mind, I'm still a twenty six year old youngster. But I'm really a thirty eight year old. I've turned into an adult. And I have no idea how to be one. I'm a twenty six year

old in a thirty eight year old's body. And it's scar- er, very anxiety inducing."

Marlie rested her fingertips on his arm, giving him a comforting squeeze. She knew what he didn't want to admit to feeling. He was vulnerable, scared, confused and frightened... and too bloody stubborn and proud to admit it. He reminded her oddly of Draco, in a way.

"You don't look that old," she told him. It was true; while Sirius could in no way be said to look healthy, he didn't have any grey hair, and not much in the way of wrinkles either. Mages aged slower than Muggles, which meant Sirius probably didn't look too different to his twenty-six year old self. None of which changed the fact that he was still twelve years out of time, cut loose from all his old ties, on the run for his life, and scared witless.

"I feel it though," Sirius whispered. "I'm old before my time, older than I should be, middle-aged without the benefits. Everything I knew has gone, and there doesn't look like there's anything coming up to replace it. I've got nothing, kitten. Nothing."

"Not true," said Marlie fiercely. She reached out and took his hand, entwining her fingers in his. "You've got me."

At that, Sirius looked up, and suddenly began to smile, dark blue eyes lighting up. "That I have," he said, amused. "That I have."

Three weeks passed, and Marlie set about sorting Sirius's living quarters out, using her wand to fix and transfigure the existing furniture in the Shack, a few Cleaning Charms to get rid of the dust and rubbish, and some Draughtproofing and Warming Charms so that Sirius didn't get cold. She also began looking for some new things for him - her habit of decking out the Slytherin Common Room had resulted in her developing plenty of channels for obtaining furniture and decorations. Hogsmeade Owl Office, for a fee, would place orders with Muggle suppliers in Muggle currency, receive them at a special PO Box address and ship them to Hogwarts for her. It was expensive, and not an option she used often (far easier to ask her parents to get stuff for her and post it direct), but now and then it had come in useful. However, now she had a Gringotts key, it suddenly became a realistic option. Fifth years were allowed into Hogsmeade every weekend, they

didn't have to wait for teachers to accompany them, and every six weeks or so, they were allowed to go and visit Diagon Alley, although a teacher would normally accompany them there. No one would pay any attention whatsoever to Marlie placing orders for furniture and the like. They'd just assume it was for the common room or her dorm. Of course, she still had to track down Pettigrew as well. But while they were working on that, she didn't see why Sirius had to live in filth.

However, there was a world beyond the Shrieking Shack, and Marlie couldn't avoid it forever. Which was why Fred accosted her in the library one day, while she was going through the Argos catalogue with a Highlighter Charm behind her Astronomy textbook. For once, Lee and George were nowhere in sight.

"Er... hi, Marls?"

Marlie glanced up. Recent events had succeeded in almost wiping the memory of the fall from her mind.

"Eh... oh. Hi Fred," she nodded, barely looking up from the lighting section. Sirius was in his twenties and teens during the Seventies, he'd like a lava lamp, wouldn't he? Remind him of the old days?

"Marlie, can we talk?"

Although maybe he doesn't want to be reminded of the old days...

"Yeah, if you want."

"OK then." Fred hesitated, indicating a chair. "Er, can I sit down?"

"Sure." But they are pretty. I can always put it in the common room if he doesn't like it.

Fred fidgeted uneasily. Where to even start? But he had to at least try and put things right.

“Er, Marlie, about what happened...”

“What about it?” Alternately, I could just save myself the money and take one out of the common room in the first place. No one’d notice.

Fred realised that she was paying no attention to him whatsoever. He slammed his fist on the table.

“Marlie, are you listening to me??”

Marlie jumped, startled by the noise. A few neighbouring Hufflepuffs glared at them, also disturbed by the sound.

“Not so loud,” Marlie hissed, finally registering his presence, and not a little annoyed. Couldn’t he see she was busy? “What do you want?”

“I want to talk,” said Fred firmly. “About... you know. What happened.”

Marlie finally recalled what he was on about. “What’s to talk about?” she shrugged. “You’re interested. I’m not. End of story.”

“No, Marlie, it isn’t!” Fred snapped. “I’m not going to... I mean, you can’t just brush me off like that, not without giving me a reason!”

“I don’t need a reason!” Marlie retorted. “I’m just not interested! Look, I’m sorry and all, but you’re just going to have to ask someone else out instead.”

“That’s not the bloody point!” Fred exploded. “And you know it, Marls. Just two days before, you were flirting with me. Now you don’t want to know. What happened? Was it something I did?”

Finally, Marlie relented. He was owed some sort of explanation after all. Lowering her voice, she turned to look at him.

"No, not really," she sighed. "It's nothing you've done. I like you a lot, you're a cool guy and I enjoy your company, but..."

"But?" Fred pressed her.

"But I can't go out with you. Not after what happened. Bad enough half the school still thinks you're a girlfriend-abuser. If we went out now, the rumours would start up all over again, and not only would you get hissed at in the corridors, people would start looking at me like I'm some pathetic weakling. I'm not having that, Fred."

Fred did not meet her eyes. "Marlie, I am truly, honestly sorry for what happened that day. I never meant to hurt you. If there's any way I can make it up to you..."

"Fred," Marlie stopped him. "It's OK. You don't need to apologise. It's in the past."

"Maybe," said Fred, not convinced. "But I still want to know what changed your mind. What happened in those three days, Marlie? What happened to put you off me like that?"

Now this would take some explaining. However, Fred could hardly be harder to fool than Lupin. Could he?

"You hurt Hermione's cat," said Marlie, realising just how petty this sounded now she really thought about it. "The night before, you'd pushed Granger's cat off a chair. Just for being friendly. Just for being a cat. She'd told me that morning."

"Is that what all this is about?" Fred demanded. "All this over a cat? Bloody hell, Marlie!"

"Suppose you'd done it to mine?" Marlie responded tartly.

"I wouldn't have done it to yours!"

"That's not the point!" Marlie took a few deep breaths and calmed herself down. "Listen, Fred," she tried to explain, "I know it sounds petty, but at the time it mattered. It was a side of you I'd never seen before and I didn't like it. Which was why I reacted the way I did. I'm sorry. I was unreasonable."

“And now?” Fred asked quietly. “Would you reconsider now?”

Marlie, catching her breath, turned to look at him. The Gryffindor’s usual fire seemed to have died, and Fred was looking subdued for once in his life. He lifted his eyes to meet hers, and Marlie was crushed to see hope there. He’s still interested. But am I?

Marlie looked into his eyes, looked over the boy she’d once wanted to snare, the one she’d wanted to make her first boyfriend, and realised... that she felt nothing. Fond of him, yes, occasionally entertained by him, yes, but in love? No.

“I’m sorry, Fred,” she whispered, turning away.

Fred got to his feet, shoulders hunched. Truth be told, he hadn’t really expected a yes, but it still hurt to see his hopes dashed. Before he left, he hesitated.

“Is there any chance of you changing your mind?” he asked softly, so softly she barely heard him. Marlie, not trusting herself to answer without crying, shook her head.

Fred nodded, accepting. “We’re still friends though, right?”

“Yeah,” Marlie whispered, feeling tears pricking at her eyeballs. “Yeah, we’re still mates.”

Fred smiled a little at that. “Cool. Listen, Marls, I’m sorry I bothered you. But I’m glad we talked. Bye, mate.”

“Bye,” Marlie whispered as he left. Gathering her things before the tears lurking at the back of her eyes made it to the front, she got up and disappeared into the depths of the library, seeking a safe place to cry.

It was near the Restricted Section that she finally found a quiet corner. Sinking to the floor, she curled up by the wall and let herself cry. Not fair, just not fair. Why do things have to end like this? She cried for what might have been, what had been, for hurting Fred's feelings and the end of her own hopes.

And that was how Remus Lupin found her as he emerged from the Restricted Section.

"Marlene?" Lupin placed the books he'd been carrying to one side and raced over to her side.

He'd caught the sound before of course - days from the Full Moon, all his senses were stronger than usual - and would have investigated in any case. However, when he'd recognised the source of tears as Marlie Lovegood, all restraint had gone out of the window as a primal rage had clawed at his mind, screaming at him to find whoever had hurt her and rip him to shreds. It was with great difficulty that he forced it into submission, that morning's Wolfsbane notwithstanding.

Marlie looked up as she'd heard her name called, and flinched in shock as she saw Lupin crouching by her side, looking greatly concerned. Hastily drying her eyes, she tried to smile.

"Er... hi, Professor Lupin?" she managed weakly.

"Marlene, are you all right? What happened?" Lupin asked, somehow managing to restrain himself from touching Marlie's beautiful, flowing, ice-blond hair... Stop that at once! his human self insisted, forcing the Beast back into its cage. Good god, the poor girl seemed unhappy enough, the last thing she needed was for the Beast to take over and

pounce on her. He concentrated on his humanity, on being the caring, pastoral counsellor he normally affected to being.

“N-nothing,” said Marlie uneasily. She lies, he heard the Beast hiss. Well, thank you very much, as if he needed the Beast to tell him that.

“Don’t give me that, you’re crying!” he barked out. Damn. That wasn’t what I wanted to say at all! Lupin took a few deep breaths and tried again.

“Marlene, you’re clearly not all right. Tell me what happened, maybe I can help.”

Marlie shook her head helplessly. “No, I doubt it,” she sighed. “But thanks for offering.”

“Well, we won’t know unless you tell me, will we?” said Lupin gently. “I promise not to breathe a word to anyone.”

Marlie sighed, her shoulders sagging. “OK. It was Fred Weasley.”

The Beast surged up again, screaming its fury, and this time Lupin had grip a nearby shelf, clutching it desperately to provide an outlet for the Beast that didn’t involve punching one of the shelves. After a few seconds, he was able to rein it in... for now.

“What did he do?” he asked, feeling oddly calm. “He didn’t... hurt you, did he?”

Marlie shook her head. “No,” she whispered, and Lupin sagged with relief as the Beast stopped its howling and settled down grudgingly. “It... it was me, sir. I hurt him, I...” Marlie paused for breath, seemingly fighting for control herself. “He wanted to talk,” she whispered. “About... what happened. He wanted to know why. So I told him what I told you, and apologised for being unreasonable, and, and... he asked me if I’d reconsider.” She gasped for air again before continuing. “I had to tell him no, it was awful, Professor, he looked so hurt!” She wiped a tear away. “I think he had real feelings for me, and I don’t feel a thing for him, and I just feel so awful!”

“Marlene...” Lupin whispered, leaning his arm against the shelf, fingers as near to the sobbing Slytherin as he dared to get.

“Why does it feel so awful, sir?” Marlie whispered. “Anyone would think I’d just been turned down, not him!”

“Well, that would be because you’re a good person, Marlene,” Lupin said tenderly, his heart aching for her. “Because you’ve got a heart, and you don’t like hurting people you care about. And it’s obvious that you do care about Fred... just not as much as he cares for you. It’s natural that you should feel sad. But you mustn’t let it get to you. You did the right thing, not leading him on. I think he will recover soon enough - in the long run, you will have hurt him less by letting him know now. And I know you feel bad now, but you mustn’t blame yourself. You can’t help the way you feel, Marlene.”

Marlie nodded silently, her tears subsiding. Reaching into his pocket, Lupin produced a handkerchief and handed it over to her. Marlie took it from him with a small smile and dried her eyes, before blowing her nose on it.

“You didn’t want it back, did you?” Marlie asked, half-smiling. Lupin pushed her hand away delicately.

“You keep it, Marlene.”

Marlie folded it up and slipped it into her bag. Lupin watched her as he did so, noting how the light from a nearby window played on her hair, making it look golden. How it framed her oval face perfectly, going wonderfully well with those sparkling eyes and exquisitely moulded lips... In that moment, Lupin let his guard down, and the Beast, whose rage had been easy to restrain, broke loose in intoxication. All of which wouldn’t have been irreparable had Marlie not looked up at that exact moment and stared straight into Lupin’s eyes.

For a long moment, they stared at each other. Lupin frowned in confusion at the expression in her eyes - she seemed stunned or, no,

fascinated, seemed to be a better word. Like she had done on the first day of term when he'd encountered her on the steps.

"Marlene?" he asked... or tried to. His mouth would not move, and Lupin realised that nor would any other part of his body. He heard a throaty laugh from deep within his mind, and tried to fight the sudden wave of nausea and terror. The Beast was loose within the body of the man.

Take her, you know you want her, daughter of your Mate, the Mate who abandoned you, take this one as substitute, feel her in your arms, feel her moving beneath you, feel her warmth inside and out, please her, hurt her, make her scream, make her beg for mercy, make her beg for more, mark her, Mate with her...

Lupin tried to fight, tried to resist with every ounce of courage he possessed, tried to stop his body moving forward, tried not to think about the animal magnetism his eyes were sending out, the magnetism that had utterly bewitched Marlie, the magnetism that was making her lean forward too, hunger in her eyes, her head tilting to receive him.

Oh my god, I'm going to kiss her. This had to stop, this was madness, this was wrong, this was something he could never forgive himself for, he had to get the Beast under control right now... except he couldn't. Rather, he didn't want to. Too late, he

realised that the Beast was exploiting his weakness; that while he could control rage precisely because he didn't want to be angry, the Beast's dark sensuality could slip out with no problem at all for the simple reason that he did want Marlie very, very much. That he'd not been intimate with anyone in years, yearned for the touch of a lover's

hand, the feel of a warm body next to his, and was too far gone to stop it now.

Until, that is, the sound of footsteps echoed out, and the Beast disappeared back into whatever corner of Lupin's soul it normally inhabited. Lupin jerked back to a more seemly distance as a reflex action, while Marlie blinked, shook herself and looked around, confused and clearly with no memory of what had just transpired. For which small mercy, Lupin was truly thankful.

Staggering to his feet, he extended his hand and pulled Marlie to her feet without a word. As he let her go, Professor Snape chose that moment to walk around the corner. Lupin forced himself to look calm, hoping that Snape detected nothing amiss. He was to be disappointed. Snape was always suspicious, a habit developed from years of teaching, and today was no exception. Ignoring Lupin completely aside from a suspicious glare, Snape turned his attention to Marlie.

"Miss Lovegood. Having a little tete-a-tete, are we?"

"Teta- what?" Marlie asked, still dazed and never exactly skilled with foreign languages at the best of times. "Isn't that something to do with what spoon you use at dinner?"

Snape's lip curled. "That would be etiquette, you ignorant child."

"Severus." Lupin was damned if anyone would speak to her like that in his presence and get away with it. "Miss Lovegood has just had a rather emotional conversation with Mr. Weasley. I found her here in some distress and was endeavouring to find out if anything was wrong. Did you want something?"

Snape paused, the sneer vanishing. For a moment he gazed at Lupin, his eyes blank, before suddenly hissing in fury.

"I was going to visit the Restricted Section in order to check some rare Potions texts." He glanced at the books Lupin had discarded. They were all to do with shapeshifting and lycanthropy. Snape just sneered at them. "Really, Lupin, still bothering with your pointless werewolf research? Would have thought you'd have given up on that years ago." He gave particular emphasis to the word 'werewolf', shooting a glance at Marlie as he did so. She didn't seem to notice. Lupin felt a twinge of

anger at what Snape was trying to do. Gathering his books he drew himself up to his full height, all five foot nine of it.

"Everyone should have a goal, Severus," Lupin replied coldly. "I would have thought that you, of all people, would have understood the importance of ambition." He turned and nodded to Marlie. "Remember, if you need to talk..."

Marlie nodded. "Thanks, Professor." Lupin smiled at her, turned and gave Snape a parting glare, before walking off. As soon as Lupin had gone, Snape's entire

demeanour shifted, and the sneer vanished, to be replaced with something that almost looked like concern.

"Miss Lovegood? Are you all right?"

Slowly, Marlie lifted her eyes to his. She still wasn't quite sure what was going on, only that she'd been upset, Lupin had been talking to her, she'd looked in his eyes, and something had happened. It had been like Lu's Glamoury, almost. Everything had gone fuzzy, and something had happened, she was sure of it... except she wasn't sure what. All she knew is that the weird feeling had gone, and Professor Lupin had darted back, looking shocked, terrified and guilty. And then Snape had come, and now he was looking at her, and he seemed almost gentle, although that couldn't be it, he was Snape. Snape couldn't do gentle. It was a law of nature.

"Yeah. Yeah, I think so. I was a bit upset, but Professor Lupin helped me get over it."

"Why does that not surprise me?" Snape murmured, rolling his eyes. Stepping forward, he stared intently at her. "Miss Lovegood, I mean,

Marlene,” he paused, no doubt almost as amazed as Marlie that he’d actually used her first name for once, “I do not think it wise for you to be alone with Professor Lupin in such an out of the way place.”

“Why not?” asked Marlie.

Snape sighed, rubbing his forehead. “How can I put this, Marlene? Professor Lupin is... unusual... in many ways. He is charming and compassionate, yes, but he has another nature in him that is entirely different, and at certain times, it is close to the surface, dangerously so. It would not be wise to provoke this other nature. Lupin does not always have full control over his actions, and while this is not normally problematic, it would be best if the opportunity for it to get out did not arise. Do you understand me?”

Marlie didn’t understand him at all, she was far too busy drowning in the memory of those gorgeous amber eyes... but she was not so fool as to say so. Instead, she just nodded. Nevertheless, Snape appeared to be mollified.

“Good. Listen, Marlene, I know our relationship has never exactly been warm, but I am still your Head of House, and I want you to know that if you ever have a problem, or need to talk to someone, you can come to me.”

Marlie’s confusion only grew at this point. Snape, the sarcastic, brooding, perpetually angry professor, whose classes she routinely managed to disrupt with her incompetence despite Rianne’s supervision, and who she’d spoken back to only a few weeks ago, actually being nice to her? No doubt about it, this was turning into a very weird day.

“Yes, sir,” she said, her tongue moving of its own volition. “Thank you, sir.”

Snape nodded, apparently satisfied. “Good, good. In that case, allow me to escort you back to the common room. You seem like you’ve had enough excitement for one day.

Another... confrontation... with Weasley is probably best avoided." It would also prevent Lupin from trying to talk to the girl, but Snape didn't mention that.

"Didn't you want to visit the Restricted Section?" Marlie asked.

Snape shrugged. "It can wait. Truth be told, I probably have the relevant text in my own collection anyway, but the library was on my way from the staff room." He indicated for Marlie to precede him. "Come. And as we walk, you can tell me how the training is going. I would be interested in your opinion of Slytherin's chances this year."

Marlie relaxed at this. She was on safe ground now. Today had been too weird for words, but Quidditch at least was something she understood. Launching into a discussion of tactics and strategies, she followed Snape out of the library

Chapter Eighteen The Price of Victory

The weekend came soon enough, and that could mean only one thing - the Quidditch season was upon them. The opening match was Gryffindor vs. Slytherin, both houses were psyched up, equally convinced they were going to win, much banter and abuse, not to mention more than a few hexes, had been exchanged in the corridors... and true to the finest of Quidditch traditions, on the morning of the game, one of the worst thunderstorms for years had swept down around the castle, howling winds scything through the eaves, sneaking in through every gap they could find as the rain hammered down and lightning shattered the sky. Even the Slytherins, hidden down in the dungeons as they were, could not be unaware of the sudden draught in the byways of the Nest, and the accompanying drop in temperature.

One Slytherin in particular, however, had decided to go and witness it first hand. Which was why, standing in the Entrance Hall, watching the outer darkness despite the fact that the sun had actually risen half an hour ago, was one Marlene Lovegood, Slytherin, Seeker, dressed in

"You don't have to do it, you know."

“Yes | do.”

“No.”

“You seem awfully convinced that Draco will just let you take over from him,” Mike remarked. Marlie just smiled in response.

“Trust me. He will.”

“Hmm. Well, far be it from me to intervene. If you and Draco have come to some secret arrangement allowing him to honourably resign in your favour without annoying his dad, that is between the two of you.” Marlie shot a glance at her brother, who was staring out at the rain himself, not looking at Marlie now. However, the faintest beginnings of a smirk were playing around his features, and Marlie began to wonder if her brother was quite as unobservant as he made out.

“I want to do this, Mike. I want to fly first team Quidditch again. I want to prove the doubters wrong. I definitely do NOT want the whole of Gryffindor thinking we’re too wussy to fly in a bit of rain.”

“If you think that’s just a bit of rain, you’ve been spending far too much time hanging around them,” Mike observed, although he made no attempt to talk her out of it. Marlie guiltily realised he might just have a point - what with the amount of time she’d spent sneaking out to the Shack lately, she’d been spending almost as much time hanging around one ex-Gryffindor in particular as amongst her own housemates. With a start, she realised it wasn’t just the reaction of the Gryffindors she feared, but Padfoot’s reaction on hearing they’d wussed out. She could almost hear him protesting:

“You cancelled the game because of that?? Little bit of rain like that? Good god, kitten, Slytherins these days... What happened to your alleged drive? Your ambition? Your apparently superior flying abilities? Scared you’d get your arses kicked, were you?”

No, she definitely did not want to go to Padfoot afterwards and admit they’d defaulted. She’d never hear the end of it.

“We’re flying,” said Marlie firmly. Mike nodded.

“Sure?”

“Yes.”

“OK then. So, er, shall I tell Flinty we’re on then?”

“If you could- hang on. He didn’t want to postpone, did he?” Marlie turned to face her brother with a smirk. “Marcus Flint’s afraid to fly in the rain?”

“Not afraid exactly,” said Michael, with a grin that showed he wasn’t too convinced either. “Just... lazy. Eh, I’m sure he’ll forgive you when we win anyway.”

“We’ll win alright,” Marlie whispered as he left. “Of that I am certain.”

She stood there for a few minutes longer, watching the rain, until she was distracted by a small shape fighting its way towards her. Further observation revealed it to be a school owl, desperately trying not to get blown off course by the howling gale. Marlie watched with interest for a few minutes before finally taking pity on it and Summoning it to her.

“Accio owl!” The owl catapulted itself over to her, squirming as she caught it and inspected the letter. To her surprise it was actually addressed to her.

Miss Marlene Lovegood, Seeker, Slytherin House, Standing on the front steps of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Letting the owl go, she opened the letter to see who was writing to her, and promptly squealed with delight to see Professor Lupin’s handwriting staring back at her.

Dear Marlene,

As a teacher and professor I am not meant to show favouritism. However, I know something of your past regarding Quidditch, thanks to previous yearbooks and Professors Snape and McGonagall, and I’d just like to say, well done on making it back to the first team, and good luck today! Unfortunately, illness means I’m unable to cheer you on in person, but I hope you do well. Go Slytherin!

Prof. R. J. Lupin.

PS. I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention this to anyone else, particularly not the two professors mentioned above. Professor McGonagall would think I was being disloyal, and as for Snape, well, he'd never let me forget it. I'm sure you know what I mean!

Lupin need not have worried. Marlie had no intention of letting anyone else in on her little secret if she could help it. Folding the letter up and pocketing it, she raced back to the dorm. It would soon be time for breakfast.

Breakfast passed as it usually did on the morning of a Gryffindor/Slytherin Quidditch game: in deathly silence. Admittedly, there were a few murmurings, but for the most part, the occupants of the two rival house tables passed the meal glaring at each other, while the neutral houses kept their heads down and out of the way. A few skirmishes occurred in the corridors, when the teachers weren't there, but otherwise, very little happened to disrupt the growing tension. And, Marlie noted with a pang, Professor Lupin was nowhere in sight.

Finally, breakfast was done, and the teams filed out to get changed, warm up and discuss strategy.

"Good luck, Marls," Deanna whispered as Marlie prepared to leave.

"Yeah, knock 'em dead," Luella put in.

"Hope so," said Marlie, trying to disguise her nerves. "But I've flown in worse, right? And my broom's as good as Harry's if not better, right?"

"Firebolt beats a Nimbus 2000 any day," smiled Deanna. "Even if yours is only a prototype."

"Yeah, don't let all the little niggles that the commercial product doesn't have put you off," Rianne smirked. Marlie glared at her.

"Those little niggles will be fine," Marlie snapped. "I can do this. Really! I can."

Rianne's eyes changed, softening. "Yeah," she whispered. "Course you can. You'll be fine."

Marlie exchanged glances with her friends. "Sight?" she asked cryptically.

Rianne shrugged. "Maybe. I just get the feeling you'll come out of it OK."

Luella frowned at those words. "I don't like the way you said that, Ri. You mean, she'll be OK, but the others might not be?"

"I didn't say that," Rianne snapped, toying with her croissant. "All I said was that Marlie's going to be fine. I can't See anything else."

"I wouldn't worry, Marls," Deanna yawned. "Go on, go and join the others. Flinty and your bro are waiting for ya."

Marlie nodded, exchanged goodbyes and good wishes with her friends, before running off to join the rest of the team. Deanna also made her excuses at that point, leaving Luella and Rianne alone. Luella wasted no time in cornering an edgy looking Rianne.

"Well? Going to tell me what you really Saw?"

"I don't know," said Rianne nervously. "I know Marlie'll come out of this having done well. But... Lu, something will happen. Something not good."

"Someone's going to die?" Luella asked. All sorts of possibilities coursed through her mind, none of them good. "It's Black, isn't it? Is he going to try and kill Harry??" Getting up, Luella prepared to chase after

the departing Gryffindor team to warn him, until Rianne grabbed her sleeve.

“Yes and no,” said Rianne wearily. “Yes, I think Black is involved. No, I don’t think he will try to kill Harry. But all the same, Harry and Deanna are in danger from him. There’s this shadow over them both, especially Deanna. And... I think it will strike today. They’ll both survive, but it will be terrible. I’ve been having dreams, Lu. My Sight’s starting to flower now, and I kind of helped matters along last year by trying to exercise it. Once it needed a trigger, but now it’s starting to work on its own. And these dreams, Lu, they’re really weird ones.”

“Weird how?” Luella asked.

“Weird in that I keep seeing Black, but he’s not like in the Wanted posters. He’s cleaned up, and he looks almost sane, except for this look in his eyes. And I keep seeing this shadow over him, and it’s linked to Deanna and her mum, and to Harry, and to Professor Lupin too for some reason. And I think Snape’s involved, because he’s tied to Black in some way, some kind of blood tie? I’m not sure. And there’s this short, ratty, blonde guy, don’t know who he is, and he’s got this link to Professor Lupin and Black, it’s like a friendship bond but really twisted and gone wrong. And finally, and this is the weird bit, there’s this long-haired white cat, and Marlie. And they’re in the middle, and they’re the same. Marlie is the cat, the cat’s Marlie. I don’t know how or why. And she, it, is in the middle, and behind her is this wolf, and it’s growling at her, poised to pounce, and I keep shouting at her to watch out but she’s not listening. And then there’s the strangest thing of all.”

“What?” asked Luella, intrigued.

“Black and Marlie,” Rianne replied. “They’re linked. I don’t know how or why or how it’s come about but they’re linked.”

“He’s after her too?” Luella breathed. Rianne shook her head.

“No! That’s the weird bit. The shadow over him, it doesn’t touch her. The bond between them isn’t dark at all... it’s light. The purest light I’ve ever seen. And when I see it, it’s like I know, that he would never harm her.” Rianne looked up at Luella, puzzled. “They’ve never even met, and yet she’s safe from him. Ain’t that weird?”

“But couldn’t that just mean she’s not a target of his?” Luella persisted.

“Then why have a bond at all?” Rianne pointed out. “No, Lu, this is more than that. Not only is she safe from him harming her, he’ll also protect her from anything else that tries to hurt her. Somehow, she’s managed to become, or will become, the recipient of a loyalty bond from Sirius Black.”

That chilled Luella more than she could say, and she could tell Rianne wasn’t best pleased either. Having Sirius Black loyal to Marlie was interesting... but loyalty bonds cut both ways.

“This loyalty bond,” she whispered. “Does it affect Marlie too? I mean, is she loyal to him as well? Would she protect him from harm?”

Rianne didn’t answer, and that was all the proof Luella needed.

“Right,” said Luella adamantly, getting to her feet. “I’m going to find Harry and Deanna and warn them. Then I’m going to talk to Snape and get him to get the match called off. And then I’m going to find Marlie and ask just what the hell is going on...”

“Stop!” Rianne commanded, with the desperation of one who knew that you tampered with Fate at your peril. Grabbing a surprised Luella by the sleeve, Rianne hauled her back into her seat.

“Lu, you can’t do that,” she hissed.

“Give me one reason why not!” Luella demanded.

“OK. Number one, neither Harry nor Deanna will believe you. Number two, do you really think Snape will call off a match on your say-so when neither of the teams want to back down? This is Marlie’s big chance, she won’t let that go unchallenged, and none of us really want to back out of playing Gryffindor. And finally, this is Fate, Lu.” Rianne’s eyes

were blazing at Luella's, willing her to understand. "You can't just mess around with Fate like this. Someone out there has this plan mapped out, the whole of our lives woven into the intricate and delicate tapestry called life. You can't just go barging in and changing it all. Who knows what might happen? Who knows what you might unleash, what carefully planned outcomes you might derail?" Rianne sat back, arms folded. "You don't mess with Fate, Lu. Because Fate is a bitch."

"Yeah, well, so am I when you piss me off," Luella hissed back. "And I'm not going to stand back and just let him hurt the people I care about! And so help me, if Marlie is helping him..."

"Stop it!" Rianne snapped. "We don't even know if she is! That bond might just be something Sirius owes her family. It might not even exist yet, I could be seeing future for all I know. I could be seeing a future that may not even happen. Listen, Lu, I don't know much yet, but I think we will all know more soon. And..." Rianne drew a deep breath. "And I think that for now, we should just let it happen."

"Just let it happen," said Luella coldly. "Just let him kill Harry and Deanna?"

Rianne shook her head. "No. No, they're not going to die. Listen, the match today, it's not the conclusion. It's only the start. Something will happen. It's like there's a game about to start, and it's been in the making for months, maybe years. And ever since Black escaped, it's been drawing nearer, as the players take their seats and get their pieces on the board. And now it's done. The board's set up, the pieces are in place. And today, someone makes the first move."

“Didn’t Black do that at Halloween?” Luella replied tersely. Black’s attack on the Fat Lady had unnerved everyone: curfews were being rigorously enforced, a constant watch was being kept on the grounds, and teachers seemed to be everywhere. While the Gryffindors seemed to be feeling it the most, the other houses couldn’t escape the tension, and even the Slytherins were more anxious than they cared to admit.

“That?” Rianne remarked drily. “That was just a practice run.”

“And the attack at the Tyler House?”

“A warm-up.”

“He’s willing to kill anything in his path and you’re prepared to just sit back and let him do it?” Luella stared at Rianne in amazement.

“He’s willing to kill anything in his path, and you’re prepared to fling yourself in front of him?” Rianne retorted. Luella said nothing, just breathed heavily, staring back at Rianne as if she’d never really known her friend before. Rianne for her part was wondering if Luella was actually truly cut out for Slytherin.

“You’d let him kill?” Luella broke the silence in a horrified whisper.

Rianne shook her head. “No. But I wouldn’t sacrifice myself either. Listen, Luella, don’t you see? There is nothing we can do, nothing! All we’ve got to go on is a vision not even I understand! We don’t know nearly enough to do anything, Lu. Which is why we should wait and observe until we do.”

“And if someone dies in the mean time?” Luella suggested pithily.

“They won’t,” said Rianne. “Harry’s well-protected - everyone knows he’s at risk. And if you think Snape’s not keeping an eye on Deanna as well, then you’re blind.”

“And Marlie?” Luella persisted. “What if she is in league with him?”

“You don’t know her very well if you think she’d willingly aid a murderer,” Rianne remarked.

“This time last year, she thought I was one,” Luella replied bitterly.

“Yeah, but we all gave you the benefit of the doubt, and she turned out to be wrong,” said Rianne patiently. “Do the same for her, Lu. Give her the benefit of the doubt. Trust that she knows what she’s doing. She’d

never endanger Deanna, and she wouldn't let harm come to Harry either. Don't forget she risked her life trying to find Hermione with a basilisk on the loose. I find it very hard to believe she's gone Dark since then."

Luella had to agree with that. Certainly Marlie didn't seem to have undergone any radical character changes. But then again, how much had they actually seen of Marlie over these last few weeks? She'd spent most of her time either in the dorm studying, or at Quidditch training.

"She's up to something though," said Luella thoughtfully. "Ri, we've hardly seen her, and she always brushes us off when we ask her what she's been doing. Never gives us any details. Like she's hiding something."

"Lu, half of Slytherin is up to something they don't want the other half to know about," Rianne pointed out. "Chances are she's found herself a guy and is trying to keep it secret. Probably got a crush on a Hufflepuff or something."

"You're one to talk," Luella snorted. "What about that Hufflepuff prefect with the serious crush on you, what's his name, Charley or something? You know, the one who sits next to you in Astronomy?"

Rianne shuddered. "Lu. Please. Don't go there; it's bad enough having the guy stare at me the whole time. At least he hasn't tried anything. If he does, I swear I'm setting Lucas on him."

"Now that'd be fun to watch," Luella grinned. "But seriously, what do we do about Marlie? Tackle her on it?"

“Hardly,” Rianne rolled her eyes. “We are Slytherins, Lu. We are cunning. And subtle. Quite simply, we will watch and observe. Specifically, you will look after Deanna, watch her, look after her, be her bodyguard.”

Luella couldn’t restrain her laughter at that. “Good god, Rianne, that’s different. Fancy me acting as bodyguard to Deanna for once.”

“Why not?” Rianne asked, only the hint of a smile on her lips. “She’s better in a fight, granted, but you’re the one who does the whole emotions thing. That’s what she’ll need, Lu, someone to put her back together afterwards.”

Luella bit her lip at that. The thought of Deanna broken and crying was not something she could entertain for long with any peace of mind. At the back of her mind, a sense of rage at Black started needling her, furious that he might do that to her friend.

“OK,” Luella nodded, fingering her wand, trying not to imagine what she’d do to Sirius Black if he came within ten feet of Deanna. “And you? What are you going to do?”

“I,” said Rianne calmly, “am going to investigate Marlie. No,” she halted Luella’s objections with a gesture, “seeing as you’re half convinced she’s guilty already, I think it’d be better if you left it to me. No, don’t argue. It’s my vision, I get to follow it up.”

“And how are you going to do that?” Luella asked scathingly. “You don’t have Glamoury, remember, you can’t sneak after her.”

“No,” Rianne grinned, “but I have other methods. You leave it to me, Lu. I’m going to find out exactly what Lovegood’s up to, and when I do, you’ll hear all about it. Now come on.” She got up, extending an arm to Luella, which the other girl swiftly took. “Let’s go watch some Quidditch.”

Meanwhile, Deanna had made her way down to the dungeons. There was a reason she'd left when she had, and that had been to do with a letter Nesta had brought her the night before.

Knocking on the door of Snape's office, she smiled as she heard him bark out, "Enter!"

Pushing open the door, she entered the room to see Snape reclining in his usual chair. For once, he actually seemed to be in a good mood, and the shimmer of Glamour perched on the arm of the chair soon revealed why.

Caitlin Tyler leaped off the chair and raced over to greet her daughter.

"Deanna!" she cried, pulling the girl into an enthusiastic hug.

"Hi Mum," said Deanna, attempting to wriggle out of the embrace. Much as she loved her mother, there were times when she wished Caitlin didn't have to, well, show it so much. Especially when Professor Snape was watching. And smirking.

"Your mother wanted to come and see the match," Snape offered by way of explanation. "And seeing as staff members are allowed to invite guests to these occasions, I magnanimously offered to accompany her." He flicked his eyes over Caitlin's robes with distaste. "And how does she repay me? She turns up to support Gryffindor." He turned away, clearly disgusted.

Deanna looked properly at her mother's choice of attire, and realised that she was indeed wearing dark red with gold trim and gold jewellery - not quite Gryffindor colours but near enough.

"Mum," Deanna groaned. "How could you? You're an ex-Slytherin! You used to play on the team yourself! Gods, you're such a house traitor."

Caitlin glared at Deanna. "Not you as well - honestly, I've been hearing all this from him too all morning. I'm here to support Harry!"

"Of course," Severus murmured. "Because the massed ranks of Gryffindor, and a not insignificant proportion of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, I might add, are clearly insufficient for the task."

Caitlin aimed a not-entirely-playful slap at Severus. "That's not the same and you know it. He's never had anyone cheering for him personally, not just the House Team."

"Apart from Ron and Hermione, of course," said Deanna idly.

"Yes, but they're Gryffindors," Caitlin pointed out as she resumed her place on Severus's armrest. "They want the team to win as well. If Gryffindor lose, they won't be able to commiserate with him properly because of their disappointment at losing. Whereas I, as an outsider, am supporting him rather than the team."

"And a Slytherin victory would of course rend your soul," Severus remarked, sharing a sly grin with Deanna, who stifled a laugh.

"I know what I mean," Caitlin huffed, sliding away from Severus.

"Forgive my mother," said Deanna, still smiling. "Her logic is not as Earth logic. On her own planet, she makes perfect sense."

"From another planet, is she?" Severus observed as he got to his feet. "That would explain a lot." He opened the door for Deanna, offering an arm to Caitlin. "Come on, let us make haste. Oh, and Caitlin, do please Glamour yourself. While your affiliation is your own business, Deanna and I have our reputations to think of, and I for one would rather not be seen walking the corridors with a Gryffindor supporter on my arm."

"Or indeed anyone else, if I know you," Caitlin shot back. "Alright, alright, I'll make myself unnoticeable. Happy?"

"Perfectly, dear." Severus turned back to Deanna, who was watching them both with a smile. She could read body language, and what they weren't saying gave away far more than what they were. They were

close, closer than friends if Deanna's instincts were right, or at least they should, or soon would, be. Funnily enough, the thought didn't bother her. Spending three quarters of the year away from her mother and seeing that somehow, Caitlin Tyler was not just surviving but apparently enjoying life on her own, had made Deanna less protective than she had been. It was also obvious that the two of them cared for each other, and Snape was more than capable of making her mother happy. Of course, there were selfish reasons too - Deanna had always thought that she'd had an understanding with her House Head, born of a lifetime of being misunderstood and certain basic similarities in personality. Snape was one of the few people she knew who was like her. To have him as stepfather... well, she could do a lot worse.

She was snapped back to awareness by the realisation that Snape was asking her something.

"What was that, sir?" she asked, mentally cursing herself. Well done, Tyler, that didn't make you sound completely spaced at all, did it?

Caitlin and Snape were exchanging looks.

"Congratulations Caitlin, it looks like your daughter is also a fully certified citizen of Planet Tyler." He turned back to Deanna. "I was asking you if you were also backing Gryffindor, or if you preferred to stay true to your housemates."

"Me? Back Gryffindor?" Deanna might have adopted Harry, but that didn't mean she had to support everything he did. "No way! Besides, Marlie'd never forgive me. Got to support your mates, haven't you? No, tell Harry from me, Mum, that it's nothing personal, but I have to live with the Slytherins, and..."

“Will do,” Caitlin grinned. Linking one arm with Snape and placing the other around Deanna’s shoulders before drawing a Glamour around them all, she led them both out.

The scene in the Gryffindor changing rooms was as one might expect - a riot of gold and red, a constant shrieking and clamouring, and the organised chaos that only seven teenagers all trying to get dressed at once could cause. Even if three were in one room and four in the other.

In the boys’ half, the four male players were doing the usual things that teenage boys do when there aren’t any adults or girls around. The twins were chasing each other around the room naked, trying to smear each other’s more sensitive areas in magical muscle relaxant - the type that heats up after being applied. Harry was fully dressed in his Quidditch robes, watching the twins with a grin and trying to avoid having the stuff rubbed all over him as well. While Oliver Wood was sitting in the corner, stripped to the waist, running his hands through his hair as he stared at the floor, trying to put together a strategy that did not involve Gryffindor getting constantly blown off course in the rain and steamrolled by Slytherin. All in all, it was a scene that most likely got repeated in Quidditch changing rooms up and down the country, and indeed, in many Muggle changing rooms if the truth be known.

Which was why, when Caitlin decided to pay a quick visit to Harry to see how he was and wish him luck, the first thing she saw was Fred Weasley’s naked arse.

“Well,” she observed wryly. “I’ve seen some sights in my time, but this is definitely one I’ll remember.”

Both twins halted in their tracks, and over Fred’s shoulder, Caitlin could see George grinning at his twin, apparently completely unfazed. Fred too seemed unworried that an attractive older woman could see him naked, as was amply demonstrated as he turned to face her, casual as anything, legs apart, hands on hips.

“Good morning, Mrs. Tyler!” he announced, as if it was perfectly normal to be standing stark naked in front of one of his yearmates’ mothers. “Welcome to our fair changing room. Please excuse the mess. We weren’t expecting guests.”

"I can see that," Caitlin smirked, concentrating on keeping her eyes fixed on Fred's forehead, not wholly successfully. Behind him, George was calmly pulling his underpants on and reaching for his robes, while Harry was standing transfixed, unable to decide whether to be deeply embarrassed or to burst out laughing.

"I do hope you're not going to play like that," Caitlin continued. "It's awfully cold and wet outside after all. That, and an old friend of mine once tried flying naked. Took three hours for Madam Pomfrey to remove all the splinters."

"Didn't she just Summon them out?" asked Harry. Caitlin shook her head.

"No, she wanted to teach him a lesson, so she removed them herself with a pair of tweezers."

All three boys winced.

"Always knew that woman was evil," George commented. At this, Oliver looked up, and noticed for the first time that they had a visitor. He looked straight at Caitlin and froze, going bright red. Then he realised Fred Weasley was standing in front of her with no clothes on and embarrassment turned to horror.

"Fred Weasley!" he cried out. "What the hell d'ye think ye're doin', man? She's a very important lady, is Mrs. Tyler! And you're standin' there, stark bollock naked?? Get out of here, the pair of ye!" Barely able to look at Caitlin, he bundled both twins off into the shower, giving Fred in particular a nasty shove as the elder twin pointed surreptitiously at Oliver, mouthing the words 'He fancies you!' at Caitlin. The twins' robes were then Summoned into the shower area, followed by the

sound of the Gryffindor captain screaming abuse at them. Caitlin delicately cast a Silencing Charm to wall off the noise before turning her attention to Harry.

"Does this happen a lot before a match?" she asked. Harry nodded.

"Oh yeah. Neither of them have got any shame whatsoever - comes of having to share a bath with anything up to five other people, and standing there naked waiting for their turn. You should be in Gryffindor Tower some mornings - you can hear Percy screaming at them to get back in their dorm and get dressed from two floors down. Think Percy takes after his mum."

"Yes, I gathered that," said Caitlin, amused. "They do get dressed by the time they reach the common room, don't they?"

"Oh yes. Well, they do now anyway. Although according to Lee Jordan, there was this one time in their first year when they walked downstairs naked out of habit, and McGonagall was there, waiting to give their induction."

Caitlin bit her lip to keep from laughing. "Oh dear gods. What happened?"

"I don't know exactly," Harry grinned. "There's several versions, and they're all unrepeatable. But the general consensus is that they ended up in detention with Filch for the entire first term. Although knowing them, that would probably have happened anyway."

"No doubt," Caitlin agreed. "But never mind them, how are you? Looking forward to the game?"

Harry nodded enthusiastically, before remembering which House Caitlin was an alumna of.

"Er... kind of. Not that we're going to win, of course," he stammered, "not that we can't beat Slytherin, mind you, but er, we wouldn't enjoy it, well not much, well alright, a lot but I'd at least try and be nice about it afterwards, well, not to Malfoy anyway, but you know..."

"I get the picture," said Caitlin gently. "But you needn't worry, Harry. I'm not supporting Slytherin today." She indicated the robes. "I'm here to support you!"

That shut Harry up. He stared at her, stunned that someone would turn up just to support him, especially when their loyalties should have been to the team he was about to play.

"Me?" he whispered, scarcely able to believe his ears weren't paying tricks on him. "Really? Are you... are you sure?"

Caitlin nodded, smiling. "Perfectly," she answered.

Harry took in the news, a slow smile creeping across his face as he realised for the first time that he had an almost-parent cheering him on.

"Thanks!" he gasped. "But... why?"

Caitlin hesitated before replying, a small tremor in her voice betraying her inner feelings. "Because your mum and dad would have wanted it. They'd have come, if they could. Only right that I should be here."

Harry gazed at her for a few seconds, lost for words. Then, covering the distance between them in a few short steps, he put his arms around Caitlin and hugged her.

"Thank you," he whispered into her shoulder as Caitlin returned the embrace. "I've never had anyone come especially to see me play before."

"I know," Caitlin said softly as she held him close, more convinced than ever that despite Severus and Deanna's remarks, she'd done the right thing.

Severus, however, looked set to disprove her as she slipped, still Glamoured, into the staff box, to the empty seat next to him, casting a few Drying Charms and sliding underneath Severus's large black umbrella, which its owner had charmed to levitate next to him, keeping both Caitlin and Severus out of the wind and rain.

"Well?" he snapped. "How is he? Still breathing?"

"He's fine. Looking forward to the match," Caitlin replied, turning a well-practised blind eye to Severus's usual grumpy demeanour as she shook out her cloak, ridding it of rainwater.

"Pity," Severus growled. "And was he suitably impressed by the sacrifice you're making for him?"

Caitlin's eyes misted over again. "Yeah," she whispered. "Oh Severus, he was so touched! He said no one had ever come especially to see him play before! He just looked so... so pleased!" She wiped a tear from her eye. "I'm so glad I came, Severus. Even if Gryffindor lose now, my day's complete. Nothing can ruin it."

"Convenient," Severus noted with a smirk. "Because Slytherin are going to, now how did Mr. Lovegood put it? Oh yes, I remember. 'Slytherin are going to kick their flabby arses from here to Durmstrang.'" The smirk was soon wiped off his face by Caitlin's response, however.

"Those nice young Weasley twins don't have flabby arses," Caitlin mused. "In fact, Fred Weasley's bottom looked rather cute. You could crack nuts with those muscles... what?"

Severus's eyes were bulging, and he'd gone an odd sort of purple.

"You were looking at Weasley's bottom?!" he spluttered.

"Rather hard to miss it when he's standing right in front of me showing it off," Caitlin remarked wryly.

"He was WHAT??" Snape shrieked, mentally devising a way of torturing Fred Weasley to within an inch of his life and pinning it on

Longbottom. Caitlin for her part simply smiled mysteriously, her secrets remaining her own. Severus was actually rather sweet when he was jealously policing her virtue. Fortunately, he was prevented from delving any further into this topic by the appearance behind them of Albus Dumbledore, sheltering under an enormous purple umbrella with yellow spots on it.

“Good morning, Severus. And a very warm welcome to you, Caitlin.” Dumbledore was smiling benignly, apparently unaware that Severus seemed on the edge of erupting. “Pity the weather wasn’t more obliging, isn’t it?”

“Thank you, Albus,” Caitlin purred. “It’s nice to see you again too. And I don’t mind the rain. I grew up in Wales, it was like this all the time.”

“Surely not,” said Albus, exuding politeness. “So Caitlin, what brings you to Hogwarts? Not that it’s not nice to see an old alumna returning, of course, but you don’t normally attend Quidditch here.”

“Oh, I got a personal invitation,” Caitlin beamed. “Severus asked me to come. Wasn’t that nice of him?”

Severus muttered something about ungrateful house betraying wenches taking advantage of him. Albus pretended not to have heard him.

“Yes, it’s good to see Severus having a social life for once,” the old wizard sighed contentedly. “I’ve always told him he should get out more, exercise his guest privileges. He’s a very dedicated worker to be sure, but it’s not good for him to be spending all his time alone.”

Severus did not reply. He was busy glaring at the pitch, arms folded and pointedly ignoring the pair of them.

“Well, he never was very sociable, was he?” said Caitlin. Severus did not even need to look at her to be able to visualise the regretful-patronising look on her face. This

was all he needed, Albus and Caitlin joining forces to bother him. Could his day get any worse?

"Oh I don't know," he heard Albus replying, in that thoughtful tone of voice that always struck fear into Severus's heart. "I think he can socialise well enough if given sufficient incentive, don't you think, my dear?"

Apparently it could. Caitlin's schoolgirlish giggle was all the confirmation Severus needed to know that she had all but told him they were on the verge of coupledness. Great. He'd be hearing about this all term, he was sure.

"So, Caitlin, who are you cheering for?" Albus continued. "Slytherin? Or are you here to see young Harry in action?"

Caitlin indicated her robes. "See these? Today I'm here for Harry."

"I thought as much," Albus nodded. The mirth in his eyes altered subtly, changing to a deeper look, an expression of pride, and respect. "Good for you. Harry needs someone to look after him."

Caitlin, blushing, stared at her hands. "I'm just doing what I should have done years ago, Albus."

"I know." A pause. "Caitlin, can you ever forgive me?"

"They call him a freak, Albus," Caitlin said softly. "They ill-treat him, make him do all the chores, abuse him..." She couldn't finish. "And he knows I know, and he wants to know why I never did anything."

"Because you couldn't look after him yourself, Caitlin," said Albus tenderly. "You could barely look after Deanna."

"I know... but afterwards?" Caitlin whispered. "When I'd found my feet again? Could I not have had him then?"

Albus gazed at her over his half-moon glasses, all of a sudden the stern headmaster. "Caitlin," he said, with an edge of reproof in his voice, "I do believe it's taken you about twelve years to fully find your feet again. Am I right?"

And to that Caitlin had no answer.

“But now?” she whispered. “Could I have him now?”

Albus allowed himself a smile. “Wait until summer, dear. Then... we shall see.”

Caitlin smiled, hopeful in a way she'd never been before. Always before, Albus had changed the subject, evaded her or flat out said no, she couldn't claim Harry, he wasn't safe with her, or she couldn't care for Deanna and Harry too. Always before... but now he was saying maybe. Maybe finally Lily and James's son could come home.

And talking of Lily and James's son... The crowd rose as one to its feet as the rival teams filed onto the pitch, one line of red approaching one of green from opposite sides of the pitch. Caitlin had no trouble picking Melissa's children out of the Slytherin line-up; nature's gifts to the siblings had not been designed for ease of blending in. Michael was easily the tallest of the Slytherins, and as for Marlie, last in line, her long hair, braided in a single plait that trailed down her back, was a dead giveaway, visible through the gloom even in these conditions. Harry for his part, tagging along at the end of the Gryffindor line, seemed to cut a very small and forlorn figure indeed, bedraggled robes clinging to him. Caitlin felt her heart go out to him. She hoped he'd be OK. Screw winning, she'd just settle for him coming through this unscathed.

She would have been even more worried had she heard the pre-match speeches of the two captains. Oliver Wood had barely been able to speak to his team, so nervous was he. While Flint, if not exactly optimistic, had seemed to be in a good mood.

“Right, boys and girls,” he’d announced grimly (but then, Flint’s emotional range had never exactly been extensive). “Here we all are again. Gathered here. About to march out against the Auld Enemy.”

“In the rain,” Kat interrupted.

“Rain? Try a monsoon,” Summer snapped. Both girls were looking at Marlie, clearly blaming her for making them fly in these conditions.

“Marcus, how are we meant to even fly in that, never mind win?”

Flint seemed unworried. Evidently Marlie had perhaps underestimated him.

“We can win,” he said calmly. “Remember, they’ll have to put up with the rain as well. We have better brooms than them. We arguably have better fliers. But basically, what it’s going to come down is the Seekers.”

Everyone turned to look at Marlie, who squirmed under their scrutiny. At least three of those present didn’t look too sure about her. However, Flint was not one of them.

“Potter’s smaller and lighter than our Marls,” he said calmly. “And she’s got a better broom too.”

“Er, is this where I point out that I’ve never flown it in the rain before?” Marlie said nervously. “Come to think about it, I’m not sure it’s even been tested in the rain before.”

Despite the dismay on her teammates’s faces at this, Flint was unfazed.

“As long as it doesn’t disintegrate in water, I’m sure you’ll be fine. We’ve flown in weather like this before. We have won in weather like this before. Potter hasn’t. Golden Boy Potter has never known what it really is to lose yet. He’s never had his back against the wall. He’s got it all to lose. Whereas flying up against him is a tough,

experienced Seeker with a point to prove. So long as she doesn't do something stupid like gift him the match again?"

Marlie opened her mouth to protest, before realising that that odd look on Flint's face was actually a smile. She'd never seen him smile before. Relaxing, she allowed herself to return it.

"No fear. If Potter gets in trouble this time around, he's on his own."

Flint had smiled, patted her on the back and rallied the team around him, leading them out on to the pitch. And now they were lined up in the pouring rain, robes sticking to them, loose strands of hair blowing around their faces. Marlie in particular was shivering as the teams lined up for the traditional pre-match handshake. She gritted her teeth as first Wood (who seemed to be living up to his name, such was his frozen stare as he barely acknowledged her), then a scowling Angelina, followed by Katie and Alicia who both seemed too cold and wet to care who they were shaking hands with. Then came Fred, who took her hand and looked straight into her eyes.

"Good luck, Marls." His eyes quickened, and a flash of something that might be anger, might be hate, might just be a twisted grin, appeared on his face and then was gone. "You're going to need it."

"Always was your problem, wasn't it?" Marlie replied coldly as she gripped his hand harder than was strictly necessary, 'accidentally' digging her nails in. "Too bloody confident by half." She let him go with a parting glare as she turned to shake hands with George. For his part, George shook her hand gently, winked at her and moved on. And then she came face to face with Harry.

He was soaked already, and looked wetter than she did. For a fleeting moment, Marlie almost felt sorry for the poor kid. Only a fleeting moment, mind. She shook his hand, patted him on the shoulder and watched him go, feeling a lot more confident than she had done.

And then they were going in to formation, mounting their brooms and rising into the air. Despite the wind, which was already starting to blow her off course, and the rain lashing into her robes, Marlie could feel the familiar adrenalin rush, the rush she'd missed for two whole years. This

was it. First team Quidditch once more. She'd forgotten how good it felt to have the whole school watching, knowing that she was the centre of attention, that it was down to her to win this. That the glory was there, just waiting for her. She'd missed this.

Then the whistle blew, and they were off, Summer and Angelina playing off for the Quaffle, Angelina winning possession and chasing off towards the Slytherin hoops, only to be intercepted by a Bludger from Flint. Marlie smiled as she rose above the action, eyes looking for Harry. There he was, on the other side of the pitch, wrestling with his Nimbus, trying to stay on course. Marlie could have laughed. She'd played in a storm before, and you didn't fight wind like this. You worked with it. You let it blow you where it would, following the pitch's air currents around. And when you wanted to change direction... you would go into a roll and let your weight and gravity pull the broom for you.

However, all this was no good whatsoever if you had no idea where to go, and the Snitch was proving elusive. Also, Fred Weasley seemed to have made it a personal goal of his to unseat her by any means necessary, as a Bludger whizzed past her nose with inches to spare, nearly missing her for the third time since the start. Fortunately, Harry was having problems even controlling his broom, never mind finding the Snitch. And so the match progressed, with one Seeker beleaguered by Bludgers but flying, and the other just about managing the flying. Meanwhile, the match wasn't pretty, but the score managed to creep up to forty-all. However, after some time, it was obvious that things had reached a stalemate. Wood called for a time out, and Flint

took advantage of the break to call his players together, sheltering for a few blessed minutes.

"This is no good," Laetitia complained. "Every time we score, they just come right back and even things up again. Usually down to a silly mistake from us, I might add," she said, looking rather pointedly at Kat for some reason.

"It's not my fault!" Kat cried. "We've been up there for two hours! It's cold, it's wet, there is water soaking right through to my underwear, is it any wonder we're making mistakes? Anyway, so are they."

"Look, let's not point any blame at anyone," said Flint, trying to be reasonable. "You're all doing very well. If we can keep pace with them, we'll be fine. We just need Lovegood Junior to do her stuff and find the Snitch quickly. Then we can win, and get inside out of the rain. Reckon you can do that?"

Marlie nodded glumly. The adrenalin rush had long subsided, and now she was wishing she were anywhere but here. In the common room. As Cleo, curled up on Hermione's lap. In the Shack, playing cards with Sirius. In Professor Lupin's office, nursing him back to health... but perhaps it was best she didn't think about that one for too long.

"Yeah, I can do it," she sighed. "Harry's having a worse time of it than I am. Don't think he can even see the Snitch in this."

However, Marlie was soon to regret those words as play resumed. She hadn't noticed Hermione rushing over to Harry and doing something to his glasses, and to her surprise, Harry seemed to be playing with a new sense of purpose. He wasn't just struggling to fly any more, he was actively looking for the Snitch now. Marlie realised with a jolt that she'd need to really play. Show him what a Slytherin can do...

She veered away as Harry raced underneath her, but it was just a feint, and the Snitch was nowhere in sight. Until Marlie saw Harry look up, and stare transfixed at the topmost row of seats in the Slytherin stands. Her heart in her mouth, Marlie followed his gaze... and gasped to see the silhouette of an enormous black dog sitting there. It was looking right at her and Harry, and while Harry was staring back at it in shock, Marlie recognised it instantly. Padfoot!

The sight cheered her up more than she could ever have predicted. Sirius had actually come to the game to see her in action! Well, OK, he might also have come to see his

former best mate's son in action too, Marlie had to admit to herself. But surely he'd wanted to see her fly too. Surely.

A bolt of lightning laced through the sky behind Sirius, and it was then that she saw it - a glimmer of gold just to the dog's right. Marlie lost no time in kicking her broom into gear and going for it.

She was dimly aware of Oliver Wood screaming something, and Harry chasing after her. The race was on, and the rest of the world seemed to die away, just leaving her, Harry in hot pursuit, and the gleaming, glistening Snitch.

Then Marlie felt a wave of intense cold buffeting her, and she realised that the world really had gone silent. Not only that, but Harry appeared to have pulled up, stopped in his tracks. No time to worry about that though - the Snitch was all that mattered now. Leaning to her left, arm outstretched, she plucked the tiny, golden ball out of the sky, curling her fingers around her in triumph. She held it aloft as she turned around, looking down at Sirius to see what his reaction was. To her surprise, he was standing on all fours, staring horrified straight in front of him and barking, although she heard no sound. Following his gaze, she soon saw why. A crowd of Dementors had arrived at the stadium and were gathered on the pitch below. They were the reason it had suddenly gone so cold, and the reason the sound had vanished.

Harry had brought his Nimbus to a halt, clutching his head in pain. And then, to Marlie's horror, he slid sideways off his broom, and plummeted to the ground.

Far below in the staff stands, Caitlin shrieked as she watched her godson fall, clutching at Severus and silently begging him to do something. Severus for his part seemed to be in a trance, unable to do anything other than watch the boy fall. It was Dumbledore who saved the day, casting a spell on Harry, slowing his descent so that instead of smashing into the ground, he floated down, touching the ground gently and being carefully laid to rest on the floor of the arena.

It was like a switch had been flicked. As soon as Harry was safely down, the sound came back on as the Dementors broke ranks and began to swarm towards the prone boy. Finally, Caitlin's composure returned. Producing her wand, she screamed the Patronus Charm at the Dementors, fuelled by fury that they'd even dare hurt her godson. It worked. A silver tiger leapt from Caitlin's wand, hit the pitch without breaking its stride, and bounded towards the Dementors. Clearly not prepared to encounter a ferociously protective Auror's Patronus, the Dementors backed off, huddling into the far corner of the pitch. With that threat disposed of, Caitlin turned and made for the stairs, swiftly followed by Severus, Dumbledore and McGonagall.

Madam Hooch and the players had already landed, and the Gryffindors were clustered around their fallen Seeker.

"Harry? Harry! Wake up mate!" George was yelling, shoving Harry's shoulder. Fred was standing next to him, shaking his head.

"No good, bruv, he's out for the count," Fred sighed.

By this time, Marlie had put in an appearance, still clutching the Snitch in her hand.

"How is he?" she asked nervously. "He's not, like, dead or anything, is he?"

"No thanks to you," said Fred curtly. "You were nearest, you've got a fast broom and you're Dementor-resistant, why didn't you do anything??" Fred was glaring at her, his face flushed. George, ever the peacemaker, looked up briefly, catching Marlie's eyes.

"Leave her be, Fred, she's been out for a year or more. She had a point to prove. Dumbledore saved Harry anyway, so it's not like she needed to do anything anyway."

"That's not the point," snarled Fred, still fixated on Marlie.

Marlie glared back at him, lost for words.

"Madam Hooch," she said through gritted teeth, brandishing the Snitch, "where would you like me to put this?" Right up Fred Weasley's arse without lubricant? She could but hope.

"In the box over there with the rest of the balls," Madam Hooch indicated. She glanced at the Snitch. "So you caught it then, Lovegood. Nice to see you haven't lost your touch. Severus will be pleased."

The Gryffindors groaned in collective dismay as Marlie flounced off to dispose of the Snitch, smug grin well in place. Oliver Wood, staring in disbelief, turned without a word and strode off. The other Gryffindors followed, with the twins last, and even then they didn't leave until Caitlin arrived, skidding to a halt and dropping to her knees beside Harry.

"Harry? Harry, talk to me," she begged. "Please!"

Severus was close behind, a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Caitlin, he will be fine, I'm sure. It would not be the first time Potter's life has been threatened. He's got a talent for sailing through unscathed."

"He will be all right, dear," said McGonagall, in a comforting tone Caitlin had never heard from her before. "Come on, we should get him to the hospital wing. I must say, it's a shame Professor Lupin's indisposed, but I daresay Poppy and Albus between them will be able to deal with the situation." She conjured a stretcher, lifted Harry on to it, and started

to lead him away. "Mildred, get the result announced, there's no need for one casualty to ruin everyone else's day. I daresay Slytherin would like to savour their victory." Severus noted the grimace on her face with an odd feeling of pride, at least until McGonagall turned to him. "Severus, can you see Mr. Potter to the hospital wing for me? Someone has to clear this lot and Albus is busy seeing to the Dementors."

Severus nodded, helping a tearful Caitlin to her feet. "Come on, love, let's go," he said gently. "He won't get better out here." Guiding the stretcher, he led Caitlin to the nearest exit, only to find Fred, George, Hermione and Ron blocking his way.

"What do you four want?" Severus snapped at them. "I am trying to get your comrade to medical treatment, I do not have time for your silly games!"

"We want to see Harry," Ron demanded. "He's our friend, we can look after him!" Fred was nodding in agreement, although George didn't look too sure, and Hermione looked frankly terrified.

"Thank you for your faith in my abilities, Weasley, but I think I know rather more than you about treating magical injuries. Now if you don't mind..."

Ron opened his mouth as if to argue back, but Hermione was quicker. Nudging at Ron to shut up, she turned to Caitlin with a smile.

"Mrs. Tyler, can we come with you? Harry means a lot to us, and we're awfully worried about him. We'd feel so much better if we could come too. Please, Mrs. Tyler? Can we?"

Caitlin found herself smiling despite herself. "He means a lot to me too. Hermione, isn't it?"

"That's right," Hermione beamed. "Hermione Granger."

"I remember. Harry talks about you and Ron all the time. I don't see why you can't accompany him." Hope dawned in the Gryffindors' eyes as Caitlin began directing them. "Let's see, I think Fred and George should go in front, clear the way, so to speak. Then Hermione and Ron can walk either side of Harry, while Severus and I walk behind and keep an eye on things. How's that?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Tyler!" Hermione breathed, before chivvying the boys into position. As the procession got under way, Severus turned to Caitlin with a glare.

"Well thank you very much, Caitlin. Does my authority as a teacher count for nothing?"

Caitlin brushed him aside. "Oh stop being so miserable. They're his friends, only natural that they're concerned. Give them something to do, and they'll be as happy as they can be."

Severus muttered something, but did not disagree. Putting an arm around Caitlin, he followed the convoy out towards the school.

However, if Caitlin had thought things couldn't get worse, she was wrong. As they passed the stairs they heard the sound of Luella screaming.

"Professor! Professor Snape! PROFESSOR!!!"

Severus turned around. Luella was definitely not the type to scream like that for no reason.

“PROFESSOR!!” she practically howled as she shoved some first years out of the way, and staggered over to where Severus and Caitlin were watching, partly bemused, partly terrified. Up ahead, the convoy ground to a halt.

“Professor? Mrs. Tyler? Is everything OK?” Hermione called anxiously.

Caitlin nodded. “Yes, fine!” She noticed the three Gryffindor Chasers still hanging around. “Can you three help get Harry to Madam Pomfrey? Just follow behind, keep an eye out for any trouble, OK?” The Chasers nodded and fell into position. Caitlin motioned to Hermione to get moving again, and the convoy set off, passing out of the stadium and up the path back to Hogwarts. Severus, meanwhile, was dealing with Luella, and Rianne, who had just emerged from the stairs after her.

“Luella?” Severus asked, grabbing the Slytherin by the shoulders. “Whatever is the matter?”

Luella took a few moments to catch her breath, before looking up. She was pale and looking more frightened than Severus had ever seen her.

“Professor, please, you have to help...”

“Calm down, girl,” said Severus, sounding far more calm than he felt. “What’s wrong?”

“Sir, the Dementors,” Rianne gasped. “When they arrived and started feeding... It’s not just Harry who’s in trouble.”

“Not just... who?” Severus whispered, not at all sure he wanted to hear this. Wordlessly, Rianne turned around, to where Lucas was directing the other Slytherin fifth years in carrying a conjured stretcher downstairs without jolting its unconscious occupant. Severus went cold inside as he saw who it was.

“Deanna...” he whispered. By this time, Caitlin had dealt with the Gryffindors, and come to see what the fuss was about. On seeing Deanna, she put her hand to her mouth and shrieked.

“Deanna!!” she cried, racing to her daughter’s side and clutching at her cold, pale hand. “Please, no, not you too!”

“It was the Dementors,” said Rianne gently. “When they came on, and the sound went...”

Lucas took up the thread. "She just grabbed her head and screamed, well, tried to. Then she just collapsed..."

"I'm sorry," Luella whispered, trying to comfort Caitlin. "We tried to wake her, but she's not responding."

Severus strode over and took Deanna's other hand. Her skin felt horribly cold to the touch, her breathing fast and erratic, and her eyelids flickering just enough to let him

see how far back into her head her eyeballs had rolled back. Caitlin looked up at him, lower lip trembling as she stroked her daughter's hair.

"Oh, Severus," she managed to get out before the tears started to flow. Reaching over to her, Severus tried to console her as best he could, but to no avail.

"Is she going to be alright?" Luella said in a tiny voice.

"Let's get her to the hospital wing," Severus heard himself saying. "Then we'll see what happens."

So saying, he led the way, supporting a devastated Caitlin as the grim procession filed back to the school.

Chapter Nineteen Pride and Parentage

Madam Pomfrey had, predictably, thrown a fit on seeing, not one, but two, Dementor casualties brought into her infirmary.

"Those wretched creatures!" she screamed. "I told Albus they'd be trouble! You mark my words, I told him, they're evil things through and through and if we don't get at least one set of parents summoned up to the school, I'll be very surprised. What the Ministry were thinking of, letting those things near children, I have no idea. Whoever approved

having Dementors guard the school clearly has no children of their own.”

At this Caitlin let out a sob, burying her head on Severus’s shoulder.

“Poppy,” Severus growled. “How about we just treat them, hmm? Save the recriminations for later?”

Madam Pomfrey noticed the stricken Auror on Severus’s shoulder and immediately guessed who the one to authorise the Dementor guard had been.

“Oh my dear,” she said to Caitlin, her voice softening. “Is Black really so deadly you had to inflict this on your own daughter?”

“I thought he was,” Caitlin whispered tearfully. “I mean, he is. I wanted to keep her safe. Didn’t think that he’d be brave enough after Azkaban to go anywhere near Dementors. Knew they wanted to catch him as much as we did. Thought Deanna and Harry would be alright. Didn’t know this would happen.” She buried her head in Severus’s robes, sobbing quietly.

Severus comforted her as best he could, stroking her hair. “Will they be all right, Poppy?” he asked.

“I think so,” Madam Pomfrey sighed. “We just need to keep them warm until they wake up. It’s probably best someone stay with them too. Having someone there to

hold their hands and talk to them will speed up things. They should come round in a few hours.”

“And then?” Severus asked. He of all people knew that very often, the problems began when people came out of comas.

“Long-term, they should be fine.”

“And in the short-term?”

“In the short-term,” said Poppy, “the more care and attention you can give them, the better. They’ll likely be very vulnerable.”

“You’d better sit with Deanna then, sir,” said Luella, materialising at Severus’s right elbow. “Last thing Harry needs is waking up to find you next to him.”

Severus glared at her, but there was no real malice there. “Cheeky imp,” was all he said to her. “Come on,” he said to Caitlin. “Let’s see how Deanna is.”

“Will Harry be all right?” Caitlin whispered, straining to see where Harry lay, surrounded by a sea of red and gold.

“He appears in good hands,” said Severus. “I am sure his little friends will alert you to any change in his condition. Now come on. Let us see how Deanna is.” He led Caitlin off to where Deanna lay, leaving Luella at the head of a crowd of Slytherins.

“Well?” asked Rianne. “Now what?”

“Well, there doesn’t seem like much anyone can do here,” sighed Luella. “Listen, I’ll stay here, keep an eye on things. You lot go, let everyone else know. If anything happens, I’ll let you know.”

Rianne nodded. “OK. Sure you’ll be alright?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Luella said wearily. “Go on, go and celebrate the win.”

“Not sure any of us are in really in the mood right now,” said Rianne as she ushered the others away. Luella guessed the undercurrent to those words: we won’t start partying until you’ve come and told us Deanna’s OK.

“Thanks,” she said gratefully. “I appreciate it.”

However, it seemed that the partying was already getting under way as Rianne led the Slytherin boys back to the Serpents’ Nest. Somebody had turned the stereo on, the room was a riot of lurid green and silver, the house elves had been persuaded to lay on a victory lunch, and everyone appeared in a very good mood.

“Hey folks!” Marlie, still wearing her Quidditch robes, although she had since showered and dried them out, squealed as Rianne entered. “About time you lot arrived!”

I was wondering where you’d all buggered off to!” She noticed the downcast looks on their faces, and let her voice trail off. Pointing her wand at the stereo, she turned the music off.

“Ri?” she said quietly. “What’s wrong?” She did a quick head count. “Where are Lu and Tyler?”

By now, the room had gone quiet, and Mike and Draco had wormed their way forward to see what was up.

“Marls?” Mike asked, confused. “What’s with the no music?”

“Yeah, things were just getting interesting,” said Draco. “We almost had the Loony Tune try her first Butterbeer.” He indicated to where a small group of second and third years were standing with the young Ravenclaw, who had apparently been invited for the occasion. It was a rather odd contrast to say the least between her Ravenclaw uniform and the Slytherin flag someone had draped around her shoulders. Not to mention the green and silver stripes in her hair, and the Slytherin symbols painted on her cheeks.

“Never mind that,” Rianne snapped. “We’ve got a Slytherin down. Potter wasn’t the only one to fall victim to Dementors.”

A rustle of whispers and speculation swept the room as people wondered who it was.

“Don’t tell me Martin faints at the sight of them as well,” Draco grinned, conveniently forgetting that when they’d appeared, he’d been clinging on to Goyle in terror.

“No,” Rianne snapped. “In fact she holds up under them better than you do.” She allowed herself a brief flash of smugness at the crimson blush on Draco’s face. “No, Tyler’s out cold. Professor Snape and her mum are with her now. Luella’s there too, she said she’d let us know if anything happened.”

The whispers turned to gasps of shock.

“But she’ll be alright, won’t she?” Mike asked, worried.

Rianne nodded. “Yeah, I think so. She just needs rest.”

“What about the party?” Draco whined. “We were going to celebrate Marlie’s birthday too.”

“Oh screw the party, this is more important!” Marlie snapped, her mind already in a whirl. She had to find out what had happened. Not only was she worried about Deanna, a small voice in the back of her mind was whispering that Sirius had been there to see Harry’s fall and that perhaps he might appreciate some news of how Harry was. She’d been intending to go and see him anyway, and had already stolen some food for him. This looked like a good opportunity to investigate. “I’m going to see her,” she announced.

“I’ll come too if you like,” Draco offered, until a hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"You can stay here," said Mike firmly. "I'm sure the last thing Tyler needs is to wake up to your ugly mug. Rianne, what do you suggest we do about the party."

"Well, I told Lu we wouldn't start celebrating until we had some news," Rianne began.

"Fair enough," Mike replied. "OK, listen, you lot. Party's off." He ignored the moans of disappointment. "No, listen. We're going to have a quiet victory lunch instead. Then, tonight, we're going to have the party properly. Who knows, by then Deanna'll have recovered and we'll have more good news to celebrate."

There was some grumbling at this, but by and large everyone seemed to accept it. And as the party preparations were taken down, Marlie took the opportunity to slip away unnoticed.

An hour had passed since the two had been brought in. Most of the Slytherins had disappeared back to their common room, and the only reason the presence of Ron, Hermione and five members of the Gryffindor Quidditch team was tolerated was because Harry didn't have next of kin there. Caitlin had initially flitted between the two children, in between occasional crying fits and bouts of self-recrimination, before Severus, deciding that everyone was fraught enough as it was without a crying Caitlin around, had given her a sedative and told her to go and lie down, get some rest. She had tried to refuse, until Luella had told her very firmly that she was overtired and needed to sleep, and that they'd wake her up at once if anything happened. She was now curled up on a bed in the far corner, sound asleep, leaving Luella and Severus alone with a still unconscious Deanna.

"Will she really be all right?" Luella asked softly, brushing Deanna's hair back.

"Which one, mother or daughter?" Severus asked tersely. The events of the day were getting to him, and deep down, he was wishing he was at liberty to cry his frustration out on someone's shoulder. But no. Caitlin needed him. Deanna needed him. He could cope. He had to.

"Deanna," said Luella gently. "I know Caitlin'll be fine. She's tough as old boots really, she's just exhausted."

“She’s not the only one,” Severus snapped. He was clutching on to one of Deanna’s hands, as if afraid she’d vanish. “Why won’t she wake up?” he hissed.

Reaching over Deanna, Luella gently disentangled Deanna’s fingers from his.

“Hush now, you heard what Madam Pomfrey said, she needs to feel she’s in a loving and secure environment so that she knows it’s safe to come back,” she said briskly. “You’re probably scaring her.” She frowned at Severus. “You know, I think Caitlin’s not the only one who needs a sedative.”

“A strong dose of whisky is what I need,” Severus murmured. Luella just rolled her eyes.

“God, you’re such an alcoholic sometimes,” Luella muttered. She turned her attention back to Deanna. “Wonder if we should get Marlie up here,” Luella said thoughtfully. “I mean, that necklace of hers brought me round, and the Dementor was still there. Might help Deanna too.”

“Did it now,” said Severus thoughtfully. “Now that’s an idea worth trying. I wonder if Poppy’s got a Comsphere up here.” He was about to get up and seek out the mediwitch when a flash of white dived under the curtains and leapt on to the bed. Both Luella and Severus stared at it. Curled up on the bed next to Deanna was a small white long-haired cat with blue eyes.

“Luella, what is that?” Severus managed to say.

Luella somehow managed to resist telling him it was an animal of the species *Felis cattus domesticus*. She didn’t think that would go down

too well. "I don't know," she replied. "I've not seen it before. But it looks friendly enough."

Sure enough, the cat was walking up to Deanna's face, its tail twitching. Climbing on to Deanna's chest, it curled up and began purring, eyes not leaving Deanna's.

"Is that safe?" Severus asked.

"I think so, not like she's allergic to them or anything," Luella replied.

Deanna shifted uneasily under the cat's weight, moaning softly. Severus was sitting next to her in an instant, taking her right hand in his.

"Deanna?" he asked, voice trembling. "Can you hear me?"

Deanna's other hand twitched, as her arm moved upwards. Her fingers scrambled blindly for the purring cat, entwining themselves in its fur. Oddly, the cat didn't seem to mind, purring even more and edging closer, reaching out a single paw to pat Deanna's cheek.

"Help me," Deanna whispered.

"I'm here, Deanna," Severus said, stroking her hair with his free hand.

"I'm here. You're safe now, it's alright."

"Mummy's hurt," Deanna whispered, her voice sounding small and in pain, as it had done on the train last time. "And... and Auntie Lily's not moving... Her eyes are open but she isn't moving, why isn't she moving?" She sounded on the verge of panic.

"Deanna, ssh, you're safe, I'm here," Severus soothed her. Luella, however, noticed the panic in his eyes.

"You're doing fine," Luella reassured him. Severus nodded, seemingly bolstered by Luella's confidence. Until Deanna's next words shook him to the core.

"Where were you, Daddy?" she whimpered. "Why weren't you there? You left, and, and, then they came, and Mummy and Auntie Lily had to run, and you didn't come back and help us!" There was more than a hint of accusation in her words.

Severus, for once struck dumb, turned to Luella, unable to form a coherent answer.

"What do I say to her?" he hissed.

"Play along," Luella whispered urgently. "Pretend. And start by saying sorry, and that you'll never leave again."

Severus nodded, gathering his wits for what would prove to be one of the hardest tasks of his life.

"Deanna, I... I'm sorry. I... I didn't mean to abandon you. I promise, if I'd known what was going to happen, I... never would have left you." Severus had closed his eyes. Every word was costing him dearly. "And I'm here for you now, daughter, I swear. I won't let that happen to you again."

"Promise?" Deanna whispered.

"I promise," Severus replied, squeezing her hand. "You're safe. Your mother is fine. You don't need to be afraid any more. Just... please come back to me. Please." His voice broke on the final word. Severus closed his eyes, fighting the tears pricking the back of his eyeballs. Truly the Fates had it in for him today.

However, it seemed to work. Deanna's eyes flickered open.

"Daddy..." she whispered, eyes still glazed over.

"Deanna?" Severus asked, hardly daring to think of what her reaction was going to be when she recovered the mind of her fifteen year old self and realised just whose hand he was holding. He was not disappointed.

She blinked once, then again. Then her eyes widened, as she snatched her hand away and backed as far away as she could.

“Oh fuck!” she gasped, horror struck.

Luella put her hand to her mouth, desperately trying to hold back an attack of the giggles. One day, they’d all look back on this and laugh, but right now, it seemed best to keep quiet.

“Oh god,” Deanna whispered, hiding her eyes as she sank into the pillows. “Lu. Just kill me. Kill me now.”

Luella finally dared to risk glancing at Severus. He didn’t seem to know what to think - although one corner of his mouth was twitching in a gesture Luella had learnt to identify as him trying not to laugh.

“Five points from Slytherin for that appalling language, young lady,” Severus said, retreating back behind the safety of his usual façade. “Where you learnt such words is beyond me.”

“Marcus Flint,” said Luella, leaping in to spare Deanna’s blushes. “You should listen to him sometimes, sir, he’s terrible.”

“Quite,” said Severus. “Luella, go and wake Caitlin from her slumber. I think the safe recovery of her only child should be enough to minimise the chances of a repeat of her earlier hysteria.”

Luella, nodding, slipped out, leaving Deanna alone with her House Head, and the small white cat, still sitting in Deanna’s lap. Which was useful, as it gave Deanna something to focus on other than the teacher she’d just completely embarrassed herself in front of.

“I am so, so sorry about that,” Deanna whispered hoarsely, as she stroked the cat. “I really am. God, I can’t believe I said all that to you.”

“Don’t be,” said Severus, mind racing with questions, mostly concerning the identity of a father figure Deanna might have had when

she was three, what he was doing now and just where the hell he'd been when Tal-y-Rhys Manor had been attacked. "It's not your fault. You weren't yourself."

Deanna closed her eyes and pulled the cat close, shaking her head. "I was though," she said, looking away. "I wasn't delirious, I wasn't hallucinating, I was just trapped in a memory." She opened her eyes again and finally was able to look at him. "I couldn't remember before," she said, staring at Severus. "I couldn't remember anything before moving to Surrey. My first memory was playing with Luella in my current front room. Everything else was just a blank, until the Dementor on the train. It... it made me remember. Not much, but a bit. Then today, with a whole crowd of them, it drew the memory right out into the open. I couldn't get away from it. And now, now I can't forget it any more. I remember, sir! I remember Wales. I remember the house. I remember Mum when she was younger, and Granma Dia, and Auntie Lily and Uncle James, and Harry as a kid, and Dad..." Her voice trailed off as the full impact of remembering hit her. "I had a dad," she said softly, amazed. "I had a dad, Professor!"

Severus was working very hard on keeping a neutral expression on his face.

"Go on," he said. Caitlin was going to have an awful lot of explaining to do, but in the mean time, he wanted details off Deanna. Details of this mysterious father figure who wasn't him.

"Well, who was he?" Deanna asked, appearing as confused as he felt. "What happened to him? Where'd he go? Why is this the first I've heard of him? Why has Mum never said a word?"

“As to that,” said Severus icily, as a still slightly groggy Caitlin emerged through the curtains, “I think the one best placed to answer that would be your mother.”

“Someone say my name?” Caitlin asked sleepily as she entered. She noticed Deanna sitting upright, apparently recovered. “Sweetie, you’re alright!” she cried, sliding gracefully on to the bed and hugging her daughter. The cat that had been sitting on her lap leapt discreetly to the floor and sat under one of the chairs, watching intently.

“Mum,” Deanna muttered, embarrassed, but not so embarrassed as she had been to discover that she’d just mistaken her Head of House for her one-time father. Determined to find out the truth, she backed away from her mother, giving her a very hard look indeed. “Who was he?”

“Who...? Who was who, darling?” Caitlin asked, confused.

“Mum, I remember,” Deanna said, impatiently. “I remember living in Wales. I remember the house. I remember who else was there. I remember having a dad back then.” She narrowed her eyes, glaring at her mother. “Who was he, where is he now, and why the hell didn’t you tell me about him before?”

Caitlin’s face had gone grey as she’d heard this, pure shock engraved on her features.

“Deanna,” she whispered. “I can explain...”

“Yeah?” Deanna snapped. “Get started then!”

Caitlin opened her mouth, but was saved from having to say anything by the sudden appearance of Hermione Granger.

“Mrs. Tyler!” she gasped, sticking her head around the curtains, “Harry’s woken up! Thought you might want to know.” She noticed the looks on Deanna’s and Snape’s faces. “Er... I’m not interrupting, am I?”

“As a matter of fact,” Snape began.

“No, of course not,” Caitlin smiled, relieved at the diversion. She got up and slipped away before anyone could stop her. “I’ll go and see him at once.”

“Don’t think you’re getting away with this!” Deanna snapped as her mother dived through the curtains. “We will be talking about this, Mum!”

“Talking about what?” Hermione asked, curious.

“Oh, nothing,” said Caitlin, sounding deceptively casual as she approached Harry’s bed. “Just a small family matter.”

Harry, meanwhile, was staring at the remains of the Nimbus 2000, heaped in a bag on his lap where Hermione had left them. The team, having broken the news of the Slytherin win to him, and then the greater tragedy of the loss of his broom, had dispersed, leaving him alone with Ron and Hermione. The latter had just slipped out to fetch Caitlin, leaving Harry staring disconsolately at the shattered remnants of his Quidditch career.

“Hey, don’t take it so badly,” said Ron, attempting to cheer Harry up. “There’s other matches.”

“Yeah, but not against the Slytherins,” said Harry softly. “They’ll probably beat Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, which means they’ve practically won already.”

“Not necessarily,” said Ron, ever the optimist. “We could still win on points!”

Harry pointed to the twigs on his lap. “Not with my broom like this we won’t.”

Ron shrugged dismissively. “So? Mrs. Tyler’s loaded, and she’s practically adopted you. Get her to buy you a new one. It’s Christmas soon, she can get you one for then.”

“No!” snapped Harry, surprising Ron with the vehemence in his voice.

“No?” Ron repeated, wondering why on earth someone with a wealthy benefactor would turn down the opportunity for a gift. “Harry, why on earth not?”

“Because she’s already done too much for me,” said Harry roughly. “It’s not like she’s my mum or anything. I can’t just go on taking stuff from her and not paying her back. It’d be like I was taking advantage or something.”

“But Harry!” Ron moaned. “Quidditch! New broom! Fast and expensive new broom!”

“Exactly,” said Harry sadly. Yes, Caitlin probably would buy him the fastest broom on the market... but something in him hated the idea of her spending that much money on him. Hated the idea of him being a bother to her. In his mind, he could hear Caitlin’s voice loudly berating him in a voice not dissimilar to Aunt Petunia’s for being a financial drain on her, how she fed him, clothed him, took him in when his own blood kin didn’t want him, bought him a new broom, and how all she got back was ingratitude. Could almost feel her hand connecting with his face...

He was shocked back into reality by Caitlin and Hermione’s voice echoing across the hospital wing.

“Oh, nothing,” Caitlin was saying. “Just a small family matter. So how is he?”

“Seems OK,” Hermione answered. “But he’s not very happy. He knows Slytherin won. Can you believe it was the first thing he wanted to know?”

Caitlin actually laughed at this. "All too well. Honestly, boys. Sport seems to be all they ever think about. Well, until they grow up anyway, then it drops to number two."

Harry reacted fast. Grabbing the shards of broomstick up, he shoved the bag under the bed, narrowly missing the small white cat that had taken up position there, and placed a finger on his lips.

"Not a word," he hissed at Ron. The other boy rolled his eyes but didn't argue.

"What's number one?" Hermione asked with a grin, as she swept the curtains aside.

"Something best discussed when you're a few years older," said Caitlin delicately, as she followed Hermione in. Her face lit up as she noticed Harry sitting up. "Harry, you're awake!" she cried, sliding in to sit next to him on the bed. Behind her, Ron motioned to Hermione to come away, leave them some privacy. The two of them moved away, leaving Harry and Caitlin alone.

"How are you feeling, dear?" said Caitlin tenderly.

"Alright, thank you," said Harry politely. Remember, he told himself, you don't want to worry her. Mustn't let her think anything's wrong.

"Feeling better now?" Caitlin asked gently, stroking his hair back. Harry nodded.

"Yeah. I'm fine now," he replied, hoping she didn't probe too closely. Last thing he wanted was for her to find out about the broom. Then she'd feel obliged to buy him another one, and he'd end up feeling even more indebted to her than he already did.

"You don't look it," Caitlin sighed. "Harry, Hermione told me you knew about how the game ended."

Damn. Harry hoped beyond hope that Hermione hadn't mentioned the broom as well.

"Did she?" Harry asked, careful to keep a neutral expression on his face.

"She did," Caitlin replied. "Harry, it's alright, you know. It wasn't your fault. Could have happened to anyone."

"Could have done," said Harry, as he recalled that he'd lost more than just a broomstick that day. "But it always seems to happen to me."

"That's as may be, Harry," Caitlin soothed him. "But that still doesn't make it your fault. And I want you to know that, whatever your housemates and anyone else might say, I don't blame you in the slightest."

Harry looked up sharply at this. "But... you were a Slytherin... and... you changed Houses today just for me, and Deanna's probably been ashamed to be seen with you

all day because of it, and we lost!" He tried not to remember that awful numb sensation when Ron and the twins had first told him that Marlie had been first to Snitch. Sadly, he didn't succeed. "We lost, Caitlin," Harry whispered. "The game, and probably the Cup too. God, I've let the whole of Gryffindor down." While too proud to cry, Harry couldn't do other than stare morosely at the covers. At least, not until Caitlin reached over and pulled him into her arms.

"Oh Harry," she sighed. "You've not let anyone down. You flew really well today. Maybe you didn't win, but at least you're all right. That's the main thing. It's not your fault Dementors have that effect on you."

"Why though?" Harry snapped, looking up. "Why do they affect me that way? No one else collapses when Dementors are around! Well, no one apart from Deanna, that is."

"Exactly," said Caitlin. "Harry, you may not remember this consciously, but you and Deanna have traumas in your past that most of your schoolmates can't even begin to comprehend. You watched your mother killed in front of you, and even though you were only little, you

must have known on some level that she was gone. And Deanna..." Here Caitlin drew a deep breath, clearly not at ease with this herself. "Deanna was old enough to understand what was happening," she began. "She was even more traumatised by it than you were. Which is why you both react so badly to them. Harry, it is nothing to be ashamed of."

"But you were there too," said Harry miserably. "And you don't collapse at the sight of them, do you?"

"No," Caitlin admitted. "But then, I know how to deal with them." She studied her godson carefully, looking very thoughtful. "If you're interested, I can arrange for you to learn how to fight them off if you like. You and Deanna could both do with learning."

This immediately caught Harry's attention. The mere prospect of knowing how to resist Dementors could distract him from the pain of defeat like nothing else. "Really?" he gasped. "Could you? That would be brilliant!"

Caitlin smiled, ruffling his hair. "Oh, I think I could arrange something. It's fairly advanced but you're both quite capable young magi, I think you can manage it. I'll talk to your Defence teacher about giving you lessons. He owes me a favour; after today's little escapade, it's the least he can do."

"Excellent!" Harry laughed, flinging his arms around Caitlin in a hug that nearly squeezed the air out of her. "Thanks!" However, his outer enthusiasm was balanced by the little voice niggling at the back of his mind. The little voice that whispered that there was no way in hell he'd ever be able to pay her back for this...

Chapter Twenty What's Love Got To Do With It?

In years to come, Caitlin would always recall, the most shocking thing about that night wasn't the deaths. Wasn't the destruction. Wasn't the beating and Cruciaty from the Death Eaters. Wasn't the loss of Harry to the Dursleys, wasn't seeing Lily murdered before her eyes; wasn't even watching her daughter lapse into a catatonic trance from which she wasn't to recover until three months later when the touch of a seemingly ordinary Muggle-born child finally roused her. No, the most shocking thing of all was just how normally it had all started.

Seven-thirty, and Deanna was finally going to bed. Love her daughter as she did, Caitlin still couldn't fathom where three year olds got all that energy from. Nor had anyone managed to work out just how Deanna had managed to get hold of James's wand and set about using it to turn everything in sight into a pumpkin. Fortunately, most of the charms had been reversible, but it didn't look like that statue of Arathorn the Unfortunate was ever going to recover. Still, at least there appeared to be a reason for the epithet now, although Caitlin had a feeling that James and Sirius were going to be referring to it as the statue of Arathorn the Pumpkin-Headed from this day forth.

Right now, Sirius was tucking Deanna in, as he usually did, and telling her a story, complete with the Sirius Black Travelling Circus of Shadow Puppets.

"What's that one, Daddy?"

"It's a rabbit, bachgen."

A pause, during which Caitlin could almost hear her daughter frowning. Then, with all the usual tact of a three year old:

"Doesn't look much like a rabbit."

Caitlin stifled a giggle. Sirius, thinking very quickly, replied with:

"It's a Deformed Rabbit. Now, do you want to hear the story or not?"

"Yes please, Daddy," Deanna replied, big round eyes staring up at the man she knew as her father. Sirius grinned, never able to resist the child he claimed as his daughter for long.

Behind her, Caitlin heard Lily approaching, having just settled Harry down.

"He's really good with her, isn't he?" said Lily fondly. It was about the only time Lily ever did look fondly on Sirius, when he was doting on his little daughter.

Caitlin nodded. "Yeah," she smiled. "He adores her. He was the right choice, I'm sure of it."

"I know so," said Lily, squeezing Caitlin's hand. "You three are good together."

Caitlin's eyes misted over, watching her husband and daughter. "I'm just glad it worked out."

"Can't have been easy marrying someone you didn't love, just so your daughter could have a father," Lily remarked. While Caitlin and Sirius had got on well ever since Lily and James arrived, things before their arrival had not been so easy, with Caitlin still traumatised and suffering from post-natal depression, practically ignoring Deanna, and Sirius regretting ever having got himself into this, spending as little time at home as possible and constantly arguing with Caitlin when he was there. Their marriage had been on the verge of collapse when the other couple had first moved in. It had taken James giving Sirius a reason to stay at home and an outlet for his frustrations, and Lily giving Caitlin a shoulder to cry on and another member of the Sirius-Black-is-an-Arsehole Club to talk to for the couple to finally start healing and talking properly. Not to mention more than a few Sirius-Lily fights, and then a few Sirius vs. Lily and Medea Tyler bouts, in which Medea gave Sirius a few long overdue pieces of her mind. Sirius, when faced with that, had finally given in and gone to Caitlin on his knees promising to change. Caitlin, her spirits rallied by the arrival of her friend, had decided that letting the past rule her life was letting the Death Eaters win... and that truly taking Sirius as her husband would do more than anything else to stick it to the one attacker she'd been able to identify

with confidence. Friendship had been restored, affection had followed, sex hadn't been too far behind, and from there, love had grown from the most unpromising roots.

"I do though," Caitlin whispered. "Well, I do now anyway." She turned to Lily, eyes bright. "Did I tell you we were thinking of having another baby?"

"Really?" Lily stared in amazement, before flinging her arms around her friend. "Oh my god, that's wonderful, Cait! I'm so pleased for you!"

"Careful, Lil, I'm not even pregnant yet," Caitlin warned her. "But we are trying for one," she admitted.

Lily's eyes sparkled in anticipation of yet another little one to fuss over, especially if she didn't have to go through giving birth to it. "Well, good luck," Lily patted Caitlin on the arm. "Are you hoping for a boy or a girl?"

"Well, I don't mind," said Caitlin, "but I think Sirius is hoping for a boy. I think he'd like another little Black."

Lily rolled her eyes. "Gods help us, another one? Isn't the first one enough?"

Caitlin laughed, as Sirius emerged from the room, Deanna finally having fallen asleep.

"What are you laughing at?" Sirius murmured as he crept up on Caitlin, wrapping his arms around her and nuzzling at her earlobe. "Not me, I hope."

"Of course not," Caitlin purred. "Honestly, Siri, you're so self-centred. You always think the world revolves around you."

Sirius blinked, turning puppy-dog eyes on Caitlin. "Doesn't it?" he pouted. Caitlin swatted him playfully, before turning around to kiss him

goodbye. It was their usual ritual before Sirius left for work - to always kiss goodbye, just in case it was the last time. Despite Sirius's usual levity, the war was taking its toll and every night seemed to claim another innocent life.

"Good luck tonight," Caitlin whispered, solemn now. Sirius nodded, the smile fading as he leant down to kiss her.

"I love you," he murmured as they broke apart.

"I love you too," Caitlin whispered, closing her eyes. Every time he left, she felt like crying and begging him not to go. Every time, she had to endure the uncertainty of never knowing if she'd ever see him again. Sometimes she wondered if they'd been better off hating each other still; at least then she wouldn't mourn his passing. But to lose him now... she didn't think she could bear it.

Goodbyes were said, and then Sirius left, heading for what would likely prove to be another night of fighting and bloodshed, another night of death. But what not one of them realised was that it would be their own home that Voldemort would be visiting that night.

"Oh my god," Deanna whispered.

They were gathered in Snape's office, Madam Pomfrey having reluctantly agreed that Deanna was well enough to leave; "but you're to take it easy, do you hear me? No partying until the small hours of the morning! I've heard about Slytherin parties."

Deanna had truthfully reassured Madam Pomfrey that she wasn't really in the mood for a party anyway, before she and Professor Snape had ambushed Caitlin and swept her off to the Potions Master's office for a detailed explanation of just who this father figure had been that Deanna had apparently had when three years old but not any more. Nothing, however, had prepared her for the response.

"Sirius Black?" Deanna whispered, clutching the arms of her chair with such ferocity that lesser quality furniture would have broken. Across the desk from them, Severus had gone pale, choking on the whisky he'd been imbibing. Caitlin looked away, unable to meet his eyes and the fury that must surely be in them.

"Please," Deanna implored her mother. "Please, no. You're joking, right?"

Caitlin shook her head, fighting the tears in her eyes. "No," she whispered, closing her eyes so she wouldn't have to see her daughter's devastated face. "No, I'm not. Deanna, I was married to Sirius Black for the best part of five years. I... I'm sorry."

Deanna sank back in her chair, dumbfounded. "Married?" she echoed. "To Sirius Black? But... how? Why? I mean... didn't you know?"

"No." Caitlin shook her head. "Deanna, please believe me, I never knew he was a Death Eater. Not until I heard he'd been arrested. That's what really gets me, that right

up until then I had no idea. I mean, he always seemed like such a good man, loyal, caring, a really wonderful father." Caitlin's voice turned into a sob on the last words. Deanna flinched. The last thing she wanted to hear was that Sirius Black, traitor and murderer, had played with her and told her stories, and that she'd looked up to him as a hero.

"I thought I was doing the right thing," Caitlin whispered. "I didn't want you to grow up without a father. I wanted you to have someone you could look up to, who would protect you and care about you. I wanted you to have a family!" The tears could be held back no longer, and Caitlin began to cry. Severus promptly got up and walked to the other side of the room, placing his hands on the wall and looking away, determined not to look. It was Deanna who slid from her chair and went to comfort her mother.

"Mum," she soothed, running her fingers over her mother's hair. "Don't. It wasn't your fault. You weren't to know."

"No, but I should have!" Caitlin wept. "I was his wife, I should have known, I should have guessed, I..." She sank into Deanna's arms. "I'm

so sorry, sweetie. I just wanted you to have a normal family, and instead I got everyone I cared about killed!" She sobbed on Deanna's shoulder. Deanna made soothing noises, holding on to her mother in a complete reversal of the usual roles. At length, Caitlin's sobs finally subsided.

"Did you love him?" said Deanna softly. On the other side of the room, Severus tensed at this question, as if preparing for a blow. When the answer came, it shattered him.

"Not at first," Caitlin whispered. "At first, I was fond of him, but I knew I didn't love him. But by the end... by the end, yes, we'd fallen in love."

Severus slammed his fist into the wall, causing both Caitlin and Deanna to glance up, Deanna curious, Caitlin stricken.

"Professor? Something wrong?" Deanna asked, frowning.

Severus forced a smile on to his face as he turned to face his daughter- no, he corrected himself, Black's daughter. He fought down the wave of nausea and fury that threatened to claim him.

"Nothing," he lied. "I just slipped. Ignore me."

Deanna raised an eyebrow, but did not comment. She turned back to her mother, stroking her hair as she touched her forehead to Caitlin's.

"It's all right, Mum," Deanna said gently. "You were doing what you thought was right. You mustn't blame yourself." She stiffened slightly as something occurred to her. "You, er, you're not married to him anymore, are you?"

Caitlin shook her head, smiling a little. "No," she replied, "no, I divorced him
years ago."

Deanna smiled, relieved. "That's good. Mum, listen, you didn't do anything wrong. You shouldn't blame yourself; it's his fault." Deanna

fell silent, as the tender look in her eyes faded. "His fault," she repeated, eyes hardening as her thoughts moved from comforting her mother to doing something about the source of her pain. Her thoughts turned to revenge.

"No," said Caitlin swiftly, not slow to pick up on her daughter's body language. "Deanna, you are not going after him yourself!"

"He hurt you, Mum," Deanna murmured, brushing her mother's hair back behind her ears. "I want him to know what it feels like."

On the far side of the room, Severus secretly agreed. In fact, part of him was already considering teaming up with Deanna to track him down. However, it seemed Caitlin wanted that particular pleasure for herself.

"And he will, darling, he will," Caitlin assured her daughter, a murderous glint in her eyes. "However, I am the Auror here, and I am quite capable of taking revenge myself, or at least, my department is. He's dangerous, Deanna. Dangerous and powerful. I don't want you getting hurt or worse trying to bring him down. He's too strong for you."

"He might not be," Deanna tried to argue. "Not if I take back-up, ow!" Caitlin had grabbed her daughter's wrist in her hand.

"You are not going after him," she said firmly. "Not you, not any of your friends. Promise me, Deanna!"

Deanna muttered under her breath, but there was no arguing with her mother when she used that tone of voice.

"Promise," Deanna grumbled. Caitlin smiled and gave her a hug.

"Thank you." She let her daughter go. "Sweetie, I'm sorry I never told you sooner. But you didn't remember anything, and I thought it was best that you never knew..."

"I understand," said Deanna softly. "That's why you were so worried about Harry and me over the summer, isn't it? Why you practically grounded us. Why you're not letting me go to Hogsmeade. You didn't want him to come and finish the job, did you?"

Caitlin nodded, not daring to say a word.

"And that's why he came to the house, wasn't it?" Deanna continued, enlightenment dawning. "He was after revenge."

"Something like that," Caitlin sighed. "Oh god, ever since he got out, I've hardly had a moment's peace. Been so worried about him getting hold of you two."

"Ssh, it's alright, Mum," Deanna soothed, kissing her mother's hair. "It's OK. He hasn't got us yet. And if he comes near me, I'll kill him myself."

"I would expect no less," Caitlin smiled, oddly proud of her child's homicidal tendencies. "But only if he comes near you, understand? You're not to go looking for him, do you hear me?"

"No, Mum," Deanna sighed, a little disappointed that the opportunity to get medieval on Sirius Black's arse didn't appear to be presenting itself any time soon. She got up from the arm of the chair she'd been perching on. "Thank you for telling me though. I appreciate it."

Caitlin squeezed Deanna's hand gratefully, and watched as she left. That had gone better than she'd thought it would. However, she was also acutely aware that perhaps the worst was yet to come.

Severus still had his back to her, clutching on to one of his bookshelves. She could see his shoulders trembling, and despite being skilled in the fighting arts, she didn't want to know how he'd react. Badly, she knew that much. And yet she had to know.

"Severus?" she whispered, reaching out to touch him. "Are you alright?"

She soon got her answer. Severus whirled around in a flurry of black robes, striking her hand away from him.

"Considering I have just learnt that the wizard I despise was married to the woman I love, and that my child was calling him 'Daddy', then all things considered, no, I am not all right," he snarled at her. "Caitlin, how could you do this to me?"

"I'm sorry," was all Caitlin could think of to say. "I should have said, I'm sorry."

Severus was unmoved. "I suppose this is why you didn't want to rush things, is it? Didn't want to betray his memory, did you? Afraid of what he might say if he found out you were sleeping with me?"

"No!" Caitlin cried, silently begging him to understand. "It's not like that!"

"No?" Severus raised an eyebrow. "Then what is it like, Caitlin? You were in love with him; you admitted it yourself. How am I to know you're not still carrying a torch?"

"Carrying a torch- Severus, how can you say that?" Caitlin cried. "After all he's done, how can you possibly think I still have feelings for him?"

"Because you're holding back," Severus growled, advancing on her. "Because despite my obvious feelings for you, you're still concealing yours."

"I'm not concealing-" Caitlin found herself cut off as Severus grabbed her face in his hands and kissed her roughly in a fierce gesture that had nothing to do with affection and everything to do with claiming ownership.

"You never tell me how you feel," Severus seethed in between fierce kisses. "You keep me at a distance. You let me in your home, but gods forbid I come anywhere near your bed. You call me love, but won't take me as lover. You married him without loving him, but despite claiming to care for me, you'd rather we just stayed friends. Our child called him father, but can only call me 'sir'. And... I... am... not... having... this... any... more!" He had backed her over to the desk by this time, pinning her to the side. Letting her go, he stood back, watching as the dishevelled Auror caught her breath, cheeks flushed, eyes wide and

lips reddened from the furious kissing. She shook her hair back and glared at him in shocked anger. Severus fought to restrain himself from pushing her on to the desk and taking her there and then. Gods, but she looked amazing. But no. There were things to discuss first.

"I can't do this any more, Caitlin," he said, voice softening just a little. "I love you. I want you. And I'm tired of playing games. So here it is. I am yours if you want me. But if you don't... if you don't love me, then it's over. Then you leave now, and don't come back. But if you feel the same, if you really want me... then stop playing around with my feelings. Take me now, take me into your life, into your bed. Tell me you're mine and mine alone, that there is no one else. Commit to me now, Caitlin. Commit... or leave. Do you want me, or not?"

Caitlin stared at him, as if she wasn't entirely sure what she was hearing.

"Severus Snape, you complete and utter idiot!" she snapped. For the briefest of instants, Severus wondered if perhaps this hadn't been such a good idea - until she reached up, pulled him to her and kissed him, mouth, tongue and lips claiming him furiously. Surprise made him hesitate - but not for long, as hands and lips began responding, drawing her in, clasping her to him, entwining in the feather-soft strands of her hair, probing her mouth, feeling her move against him.

"I'm all yours, Severus," he heard her whisper. "Always have been. Always will be."

"All mine," Severus murmured back as he began to unfasten the front of her robes. To hell with romance and gentle seduction. It was time. He'd waited so long for this. Leaving her neck, he began to trace a row of kisses from the base of her neck downwards, hungrily claiming the top of her breasts. "All mine, and only mine."

"Only yours," Caitlin gasped, pulling his head in closer as his arms grabbed at her back and bottom, holding her tight against him. "Just you... no one else- ah!" Severus had pushed her right up against the desk. Sweeping the contents on to the floor with one gesture, he laid Caitlin down none-too-gently, hoisting her dress up to her waist.

"Just mine," Severus purred as he slipped out of his own outer robes, before completing his disrobing of Caitlin. "All mine." He leaned over

her, pressing his body against hers as they kissed, lips apart and tongues meeting as Caitlin pulled him to her, wrapping her legs around him. "Truly mine," Severus murmured as he slid inside her. It was the last coherent thought in either of their minds for some time.

Afterwards, they left the desk and relocated to Severus's chair, Caitlin curled up on his lap, head resting against the top of his, while Severus laid his head on her shoulder.

Severus, exhausted, had simply pulled her into his arms, closed his eyes and held her tight.

"Don't leave me," he whispered. "Never leave me."

"I won't," Caitlin soothed him, stroking his hair, which generally looked a lot worse than it actually felt. "That is... if you still want me?"

Severus growled at this, pulling her towards him again. "I thought we just settled that on my desk? Unless of course you've made me break some of my prize specimen jars and ruin the third year essays for no reason?"

"Hecate forbid I ruin the third year essays for nothing," Caitlin giggled. Severus just shrugged.

"I wouldn't worry, I doubt they contain any deep and profound insights that will radically transform the art of potions making as we know it."

"And if they did, you'd probably take all the credit."

Severus smiled at this. "Professor's privilege, my dear. Let the students do the hard work, and publish the conclusions as one's own." His expression softened. "You know, you never did really answer my question."

"What question was that?" Caitlin asked, wracking her brains to recall what he'd said earlier.

"Do you still want him?"

The question startled her out of her dreaming.

"What- no, of course not!" Caitlin gasped. "Gods, Severus, he got my family killed! Hardly conducive to affection, is it?" Severus just smiled oddly at that, folding his arms and smirking, even as his eyes filled with pain.

"I have caused deaths too, and you still showed an interest in me."

"That's different," said Caitlin.

"How, Caitlin?" Severus asked, still wary. "If you can love this Death Eater, why not him?"

"You never betrayed me," Caitlin said gently. "You were evil, but at least you told me no lies."

Severus had no answer to that. Caitlin bit her lip, wanting more than anything to hold him, to reassure him she loved him, to hold him and smooth the pain and jealousy away. To make him believe he was truly loved.

"And now?" Severus said softly, so softly she could barely hear him.

"Who do you want now?"

"You," Caitlin whispered, as she leaned up to kiss him. "Just you."

Severus responded by reaching upwards and meeting her lips with his own. The kiss that followed was gentler than before, but no less passionate for that as nearly twenty years worth of emotion finally found its culmination. Finally they broke apart.

"I love you," Caitlin breathed before she could stop herself. She instantly regretted it. Everything was still so new between them - was she rushing things? Fortunately, it seemed not. Severus blinked in surprise, unused to hearing people tell him they cared. Actually

blushing, he looked away and murmured something that might have been "I love you too".

Caitlin grinned and hugged him. By Severus's usual standards, that was rather romantic.

"I know you do," she whispered, pulling him close to her. They remained like that for some time, Severus nestled on her shoulder.

"Have you forgiven me for shouting at you earlier?" Severus asked. Caitlin rolled her eyes at this apology-that-was-not-an-apology.

"I think I can be persuaded. It's rather sweet from a safe distance, watching you being all jealous and over-protective," she smiled, ruffling his hair.

Severus snatched Caitlin's hand up, kissing it. "No one hurts you, Caitlin. No one. And if I cross paths with Black, he will wish he had never laid eyes on you."

Caitlin smiled, an evil little smile that had sent lesser men screaming from the room. "I love it when you get all vengeful and sadistic. So... sexy."

Severus grinned as she shifted position to straddle him.

"My dear, when it is for you, revenge is very pleasure itself."

"Maybe," Caitlin whispered hungrily. "But until we find Black, we'll have to make do with other things, won't we?"

"Now that I like the sound of," Severus murmured as they kissed again. And preparing to make love a second time, they banished all thoughts of Black from their minds.

Marlie, still in her cat form, raced through the school, her mind ablaze with what she'd learnt. After trying to get in to the hospital wing in her human form and being turned away by an adamant Madam Pomfrey who insisted that her patients needed their rest, Marlie had gone away and returned in her cat form, sneaking in unnoticed in order to carry out a little judicious eavesdropping. And what eavesdropping! In the space of half an hour, she'd not only discovered that the Gryffindors' star Seeker was

broomless and adamant in refusing any assistance in replacing it, but that her fatherless friend hadn't always been that way. That at three years old, when she still lived in Tal-y-Rhys Manor, she'd had a father, or more likely a stepfather. One who'd disappeared and never been seen again. And when you knew what Marlie did, it wasn't exactly difficult to work out who it was.

"Sirius bloody Black!" she yelled as she emerged into the Shrieking Shack and shifted into her human form. "Why the hell didn't you tell me earlier??"

Sirius looked up from where he'd been pacing the floor, desperate for Marlie to bring him news.

"Tell you what earlier?" he asked, genuinely surprised. He grabbed Marlie by the shoulders. "Harry, how's Harry, is he alright? I didn't mean to frighten him, I just wanted to see if he was as good on a broom as his old man..."

"Harry is fine," Marlie snapped. "He just reacts badly to Dementors, that's all. Something to do with watching his mum killed in front of him."

Sirius, already far from healthy-looking, went even paler at this. "He saw- I mean, he even remembers that?"

"Not consciously," Marlie sighed, her anger dissipating. "But when someone's near Dementors, repressed traumatic memories apparently come back. Which you of all people should know."

"Poor kid," Sirius breathed, closing his eyes. "Yeah, don't I know it. I can remember every bad thing that's ever happened to me, in detail that would amaze you. But the good memories? Gone, kitten, just gone. Bit like a charity shop jigsaw, with all the pieces jumbled up and the original box gone so you've no idea what it's meant to look like and half the pieces have disappeared anyway..." He opened his eyes. "I hate the fucking things," he stated flatly. "Sodding Dementors. Really, really hate them."

"Sirius," Marlie whispered, taking his hand. "It's alright. You're OK now. And Harry and Deanna will be fine too."

"Deanna?" Sirius's attention perked up in an instant. "What's wrong with Deanna? Is she hurt?" The fear in his eyes confirmed Marlie's suspicions.

"No," said Marlie gently, guiding Sirius over to the recently purchased black leather sofa. "But she doesn't react any better to Dementors than Harry does, and for much the same reason. She was there too when Lily died, you know. And she was older."

"Yeah, but she was still only three," said Sirius. "I mean, how much can she remember from back then? Anything?"

"Er... everything?" Marlie admitted, dreading the response.

"Every-" Sirius stopped in midsentence. Even he could work out what that meant. "What, everything?" He looked up, suddenly hopeful. "Does she... does she remember me?"

"Yes," said Marlie softly. "Sirius, you're her dad, aren't you?"

Sirius stared at his hands. "Stepdad," he said quietly. "At least, I used to be. I didn't know she'd remember me, she was only little at the time. God, she was three years old when I last saw her..."

"You were married to Caitlin Tyler?" Marlie asked, remembering his visit to her at the start of the year. That would explain a lot...

"Yeah," Sirius nodded. "For, what, four years? Five years? Bugger it, I lost count."

Marlie frowned a little. "How did that work then? She was meant to be legally dead, wasn't she?"

"Well, yeah. But Medea, as Cait's Clan Leader, could perform a rite that would marry us as far as the family was concerned, and we were

going to get the legal niceties done when it was safe. Of course, we never actually got that far, but that's life for you."

Marlie attempted some mental calculations. "So you got married before Deanna came along then. And she was three and a bit when you went in, so you must have got married around the time she was conceived..."

"About a month after, to be precise," said Sirius grimly. "See, when Cait finally got away from You-Know-Who and his Evil Minions, it was me who was there with Medea when she arrived..."

"I can't thank you enough for all you've done," Medea whispered as Sirius brought her another cup of tea. Over the last few days, they'd gone through enough tea bags to restock an entire supermarket. "I don't know how I'd have coped without you."

Sirius placed the cup on the small table next to the sofa that Medea was lying on, dropping to crouch next to her as he took her hand in both of his.

"Hey, don't thank me," Sirius said gently. "I'm just doing what anyone would have done."

"Nonsense," Medea said brusquely. "I don't see anyone else queuing up to offer their condolences, do you? And you've spent your every off-duty hour here, doing this, doing that, running errands, trying to take my mind off things... Sirius, you've gone above and beyond the call of duty since Caitlin disappeared." She smiled sadly at the young Auror. "I won't forget it."

Sirius looked away, blushing. "S'least I could do," he muttered shyly. "I mean, Cait was a good mate, you know?"

Medea stiffened at his use of the past tense. Sirius immediately realised his mistake.

"Is," he said hastily. "Cait still is a good mate. When she comes back, she will be. Oh god..." Medea had broken down in tears again, a not infrequent occurrence recently.

"Dia," Sirius pleaded, pulling the crying witch into his arms. "Oh god, I didn't mean... I'm sorry. Look, she'll be OK. She'll escape. She'll make it somehow. Cait's good, she won't go down without a fight... oh bloody hell." Medea had flung his arms around him and was now weeping uncontrollably, tears soaking Sirius's Ramones t-shirt.

"Oh god," she sobbed. "My poor baby, my little girl! What are they doing to her? I can't even imagine what she's going through right now, but the alternative..." She dissolved into tears. Sirius could only look on helplessly, stroking her hair and holding her, fighting his own fears, not to mention the knowledge born of years of experience - that very few of those who entered the Dark Lord's dungeons ever emerged alive again, and none of those in any condition you'd actually want to continue living in. That was why he'd been spending every idle minute with Medea - if he'd had to go home every night to the scruffy little bachelor pad he called home, with nothing to do but stare at the walls, he would probably have gone mad himself. As it was, looking after Medea Tyler had helped take his mind off things. It didn't hurt that Medea was easily as attractive as her daughter either. Despite everything, Sirius's sex drive was not so easily turned off.

"I'm never going to see her again, am I," Medea whispered. Sirius flinched at the hopelessness in her voice.

"Don't say that," Sirius urged her, ruffling her hair, inwardly refusing to give up so easily. "You don't know."

"No," Medea shook her head, tears rolling down her cheeks. "I've lost her. My Heiress is gone, my family line has ended, I could have another child, I suppose, but I'm old, Sirius. Old, and tired, and no man would look twice at me now."

"I would," Sirius whispered, before he could stop himself. Bollocks, he thought, freezing as he realised she'd heard him. Yes, he'd always

thought Medea Tyler was fit, but Jesus Christ, he'd never wanted her to know it! Oh god, he was never going to live this one down.

Medea had gone very still in his arms. Slowly, she lifted her head, eyes still filled with tears, but no longer as barren as they had been. Now they just looked amazed.

"You would?" Medea asked strangely. Well, in for a penny... Sirius nodded.

Medea kept staring at him, apparently trying to get her head around the idea of this handsome young man who could have his pick of women possibly finding her attractive. However, like Caitlin in years to come, she wasn't averse to the idea of taking a fit young Auror into her bed either. Closing her eyes, she lifted her lips to his, mouths meeting as mutual need drove them both together, need and the emptiness of bereavement.

This is wrong... a little voice in the back of Sirius's mind whispered as Medea's hands ran through his hair and slid under his shirt. However, by this stage in his life, his libido was far too used to running the show to pay any attention. The shirt was soon gone, and Medea's robes were not slow to follow.

Afterwards, the two of them rested by the fire, wrapped in Medea's cloak. Medea was nestled against Sirius's shoulder, eyes closed. For now, at least, she seemed at peace.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"No need to thank me," Sirius replied gently. "It's not every day I get seduced by a sexy older witch, after all."

"No?" Medea smiled. "You do surprise me. I would have thought you'd be spending half your life sneaking out of back windows, trying to get away from angry husbands."

"I tend to avoid the married ones," Sirius coughed. "Well, I do now, anyway." He winked at her. Medea smiled knowingly, having heard all sorts of stories about Sirius's colourful love life from Caitlin. The thought of her daughter wiped the smile off Medea's face in a second, as she remembered that her daughter was almost certainly gone for good and not all the hot sex with attractive young Aurors would change that.

However, the distant sound of the front door opening and then slamming shut again served to distract them both.

"What was that?" Medea gasped, sitting up. Sirius had already located his wand and Summoned their clothes.

"You expecting anyone?" he asked as he pulled his jeans on. Medea shook her head.

"No, no one can get past the house defences without me knowing. Well, no one except Caitlin anyway..."

"Caitlin," they both gasped at the same time. Within minutes, they were fully dressed, wands in hand, and racing for the front hall.

Sirius was in the lead, his longer legs easily outstripping Medea's. And it was he who first spotted the small figure kneeling on the floor.

"Who's there?" he called, lifting his wand. You could never be too careful in those days.

Slowly, it lifted its head. Behind him, Medea whispered her name as she recognised her daughter.

"Caitlin..."

Everything was a blur after that. Just Caitlin sobbing in her mother's arms, and Sirius picking her up and carrying her to her bedroom, from which she barely emerged in

the subsequent weeks. Caitlin had sobbed out her story to them both, and Medea had had to physically restrain Sirius from independent vigilante action. Of course, they had both come to a tacit understanding that what had happened just prior to Caitlin's return would not be repeated. Caitlin needed her mother, and Medea didn't want Sirius to... complicate... matters. Sirius had no problems with that. It wasn't like he was in love or anything, although he was fond of Medea. So he devoted his energies to trying to entertain both Tyler women and take their minds off things. Surprisingly enough, it seemed to work, and when he was visiting, Caitlin seemed more alive, happier, and generally in far better shape than when she was alone with her mother. All of which meant Sirius spent most of his free time there.

And then things got really complicated about three weeks later...

Sirius, as had become a habit, finished his shift at work and dropped in to see how his two favourite witches were doing. Not seeing any sign of them downstairs, he made his way up to Caitlin's room to see if they were in there. Sure enough, there they were, talking. Except they weren't just talking. Caitlin was lying back on the bed, eyes shut and face twisted in fear. Medea for her part was sitting next to her, with what looked like her wedding ring hanging from a thread, twisting gently over Caitlin's stomach. Sirius caught his breath, hanging back out of sight. He recognised the ritual - he'd seen enough of his own female clanmates using it before now. It was one used by pregnant women to determine what sex their baby was. Sirius bit his lip in horror - hadn't the poor girl suffered enough, without those bastards having to knock her up in the bargain? He idly wondered why they were messing about trying to find out which one it was, before remembering that this was the matrilineal Tyler family - they wouldn't want to abort a girl, but would likely have no scruples about getting rid of an unwanted son. Part of him objected to such a mercenary way of thinking; but then again, it wasn't him who'd have to carry it, and if he'd been in that position, he'd have been getting rid of it anyway, without mucking about with any divination rites.

Medea stared at the ring, frowning. It was rotating slowly anticlockwise.

"It's a girl," she breathed. Caitlin's eyes shot open, while Sirius closed his. God, poor Caitlin... How the hell was she going to manage? He didn't know, but Sirius knew he couldn't just leave Caitlin to bring up her little girl on her own. She'd need help.

"Oh gods," Caitlin was howling into her mother's robes. "No, no, no! I can't do it," she whispered. "Can't handle this! I'm too young to be a mum, not on my own, not like this!" She starting crying again.

"Caitlin," Medea whispered, soothing her as best she could. "Caitlin bach, don't cry! Don't cry!" She switched to Welsh, their mutual mother tongue, crooning over her tenderly as if to a child. It seemed to work, because Caitlin's tears soon subsided.

"I'm scared," she whispered. "I'm so scared!"

"It'll be alright, Caitlin," Medea whispered. "It'll be alright!"

"My little girl," Caitlin whispered. "How is she going to cope? How is she going to manage, knowing where she came from? My little girl, Mum!" Caitlin started crying.

Sirius felt his heart stick in his throat. Caitlin had a very good point. What the hell was that poor innocent girl going to think when she got older and started asking questions? How did you explain to a kid that she was the product of an act of violence? Sirius knew he could never explain that to one of his own kids. It was then that the thought came to him: what if no one ever had to explain it to her? What if she never knew? What if she never asked questions... because she never had to? What if she knew, or at least thought she knew, who her dad was?

Sirius knew in that instant what he had to do. Knew he couldn't walk out on either of the Tyler women. Yes, he'd almost certainly regret this... but he knew he'd regret it more if he did nothing.

"Listen, cariad," said Medea firmly. "You're going to have this baby. And you're going to be the best mother it could possibly have. And she's going to be beautiful, and strong, and brave, and powerful, just like her mother. And she's going to have a mam, and a grandmam who love her very much, and she's going to have lots of devoted aunts and uncles who think the world of her. And Castell y Tal-y-Rhys'll be her home, and she'll grow up to be a mighty warrior-princess for the forces of good." Medea smiled again. "Just like her mam."

"And me, Caitlin," said Sirius, striding into the room. "Don't forget me. Well, apart from the warrior-princess bit, of course. Not sure the tight leather tunics would suit me." He flashed them both a grin as he slid on to the bed. Caitlin giggled, despite her tears.

"You big idiot," she teased. Sirius flushed.

"Yeah," he sighed. "Aren't I just? So I'm to be an uncle, am I?"

Caitlin stared at her hands, fingers twisting together. Medea squeezed her daughter's shoulder, looking slightly wary.

"You heard then," she said. Sirius nodded.

"Yeah. Tell you what, Cait, you're braver than me to raise this kid. If it were me, well... this is probably going to sound really tasteless, but I wouldn't be doing what you're doing, let's put it that way. Boy or girl."

"My little Heiress," Caitlin whispered, stroking her belly. "Oh gods, what on earth am I going to do? I'm not ready, I'm not!"

As the tears started to flow, Sirius took in a deep breath and took Caitlin by the hand. "Cait, I have something to tell you. I... I don't want to be the kid's uncle."

Caitlin gasped, staring up at him. The hurt in her eyes nearly made him look away, and as for Medea, Sirius could practically feel the rage emanating off her.

"Not be... Sirius, you can't go! I need you!" Caitlin sobbed. "We need you!"

"Sirius," Medea said in a soft, low voice, "you are clearly planning something so instead of hexing your testicles off and throwing you out of the house, I'm going to give you a chance to explain yourself. But make... it... quick!"

"Fine," said Sirius, pulse racing. "Listen, Cait, it ain't easy raising a kid on your own. It especially ain't easy when that kid starts to get older, and starts noticing that everyone else has two parents. And it really ain't easy when you're in your position, and have to try and explain where she came from. So, what I was thinking was, what if you never had to?"

Caitlin was looking at him, confused. Medea, however, appeared to have realised where he was going with this.

"Go on," she said, intrigued. "What are you saying, Sirius?"

"I'm saying," said Sirius, shaking with every breath, "that if little Tyler Junior grew up with a father, you'd never have to explain. Because she'd never ask. You'd have help bringing her up. And, you know, you might even be happy with m- him. All you'd have to do would be to find a nice man, marry him, and there you are. Happy families."

"Yeah," said Caitlin sourly. "Happy families. Just one little problem, Sir-kins. HOW AM I MEANT TO FIND A HUSBAND IF I'M IN HIDING IN FEAR FOR MY LIFE?!" she screamed at him.

Sirius closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and uttered the words that would irreversibly alter both their futures.

"You could marry me?"

Silence. Neither Tyler woman had said a word. After the tension became too much, Sirius opened his eyes. Caitlin was staring at him in utter shock, while Medea's face looked like a mask.

"OK, that's all I wanted to say," Sirius laughed nervously, desperate for one of them to say something, anything. "Dia, you can hex me nads off and throw me out now." He immediately regretted saying that, as from the look on Medea's face, she was contemplating doing just that. However, she shook herself, softened her expression and said gently to Caitlin:

"Well, Caitlin? What do you think? You could do worse, you know."

"I... I don't... don't know what to say..." Caitlin whispered. "Oh gods... Sirius!" She burst into tears, throwing her arms around him, sobbing into the Led Zeppelin shirt he had on. Shifting uncomfortably, he drew Caitlin into his arms.

"Don't cry," he urged her, staring at Medea in panic. "I'm not that bad, am I?"

Caitlin shook her head, but did not stop crying. Sirius appealed to her mother.

"Dia? Is this a good idea, or should I get me coat?"

Medea pursed her lips, clearly thinking it over. For a horrible minute, he thought she was going to tell him to get lost. Then, she smiled tenderly.

"I think it's a wonderful idea. That's if my daughter agrees?"

Caitlin looked up, first at her mother, then at Sirius. She hesitated, before flinging her arms around Sirius again.

"Oh god, I love you both so much!" she wept, kissing Sirius on the cheek. "Sirius, do you really mean that? Would you really do that for us?"

"Course I would, yer daft thing," Sirius grinned, ruffling her hair. "I like kids. And I also like Tyler women. I'm sure we'll be just fine."

Caitlin, finally smiling, hugged him, resting her head on his shoulder. "Yeah, just fine."

Medea, smiling with only a hint of sadness in her eyes, got up to give them both some privacy, kissing them both on top of their heads as she left. Sirius turned his attention to his new fiancée.

"Listen, Cait," he began, "I know you don't love me, and I know that if things were different, you wouldn't look twice at me, but I do care about you, you know. And I promise I'll take care of you both, for as long as you need me. I'm gonna look after you both, I swear it. Gonna be the best husband and father you could ever wish for. I promise I'll never hurt you, or be cruel to you, or make any demands on you or anything. I mean, I know we'll be married, but if you don't want to... you know. I mean, like, if you only want to be married in name only, that's fine, that's really fine. We'll just carry on as the mates we are, and, er, do some childrearing stuff as well."

"You big idiot," Caitlin whispered again. Sirius grinned and hugged her. Maybe things wouldn't be so bad after all.

Later, when Caitlin was sleeping, Sirius joined his future mother-in-law on her balcony.

"Dia?"

"Sirius."

"You, er, you're not... annoyed, are you?" he asked nervously. "Because I wouldn't want you to think I was pushing you over for a younger woman, because I'm not, it's just that Caitlin needs me more, and..." He trailed off, acutely aware he was sounding like an idiot.

"Sirius." Medea turned and approached him, that same sad smile on her face. "You're a very attractive man, and yes I do admit I'm a little jealous of my daughter, and yes it will hurt to see you with her. But she needs you more than I do. My granddaughter

needs you more than I do." She brushed his cheek gently, before leaning up and kissing him once on the lips. "You're a good man, Sirius. I'm proud to have you in my family. And speaking of which..." She stood back. "There's something I need you to do."

"Yeah?" Sirius asked warily. "Is this some kind of initiation rite or something? I'm not going to have to strip naked and kneel in the mud blindfolded while being whipped with pampas grass and singing 'Ten Million Green Bottles Hanging On The Wall', am I?"

Medea burst out laughing. "I think you've been watching too many Muggle documentaries, Sirius. No, all you have to do is kneel and place your hand on my wand." She produced her handmade ebony wand and held it out for him to touch. Dropping to his knees, Sirius did as she asked.

"This really is an initiation rite, isn't it?" Sirius whispered. Medea inclined her head in a gesture that could have been yes or no.

"Think of it more as a gesture of loyalty," Medea told him. "Sirius, I want you to swear fealty to me. It'll make you a Son of the Tal-y-Rhys, truly one of us. I mean, the marriage rite will do that anyway, but I feel you should be part of us beyond that. Because you're not just a good man, you're a warrior. A Champion. And I want you on my side. I want you with us, part of my clan. Even if Caitlin decides she's had enough and divorces you, I still want to know I can count on you."

"You can," Sirius breathed. "Always."

Medea smiled. "I thought as much. Now, repeat after me..."

And so Sirius became a lifelong Son of the Tal-y-Rhys, sworn liegeman of Medea, independently of his marriage to Caitlin Tyler. A bond that, in years to come, when he'd lost everything else, would still protect him and let him get past Caitlin's strongest wards and defences. A bond he'd honour to his deathbed.

Finally, it was done, and Sirius got to his feet and prepared to leave. However, Medea called him back.

"Wait a minute, Sirius. I'm not finished with you yet."

Sirius stopped in his tracks. This didn't sound good. Turning around to face her again, he waited to hear what else she wanted from him. Medea, noticing his nervousness, smiled.

"Don't look so worried, Sirius. The difficult part's over. No, it's just that on receiving an oath of loyalty, it's customary to offer a gift."

Sirius perked up at her words. "I get a present too? Cool! What is it? My own brewery? Shares in Benson and Hedges? You've not got me Jimmy Page's guitar, have you?"

Medea laughed. "No, no, nothing like that. Something you might actually need."

Sirius thought to himself that shares in a cigarette company or a brewery sounded pretty useful to him. However, he was intrigued as to what Medea might have for him. Reaching to her throat, she removed the chain she was wearing and held it out to him. Strangely, despite the obvious value of the gold chain, the pendant itself was quite plain, being a simple square of gold with the initials MT carved on it in runes. As Sirius watched, Medea tapped it with her ebony wand and whispered a Revealing Charm. Before his eyes, it mutated into a key. A Gringotts key, to be precise. With a number on it, indicating that it belonged to one of the exclusive maximum security numbered vaults. And Medea was holding it out to him.

"For me?" Sirius barely managed to stammer.

Medea nodded. "For you. Go on then, take it!"

Sirius, fingers shaking, barely managed to take it from her without dropping it.

"How much is in there?" Sirius whispered hoarsely, his throat suddenly dry.

"Enough," Medea replied. "Enough so that you won't have to keep asking Caitlin for money. Enough even to keep you in beer and cigarettes, although I'd rather you didn't spend it all on that." Sirius could only laugh nervously. Medea smiled knowingly at him. "Sirius, if you keep having to come to us for money, you're going to hate us eventually. I don't want that. Besides, everyone should have something tucked away for leaner times. I am no true Seer, but I occasionally have insights, and I think that one day you will need access to a plentiful supply of money that is not in your name."

"You reckon?" Sirius asked, rather worried. The only circumstances in which he could envisage that happening was if he was on the run... but surely an Auror would never find himself in that situation, would he? Still, he wasn't one to turn this down. "Thank you," he whispered.

"Don't mention it," Medea replied. "Now, let me show you how the concealment charms work. Probably best if no one else, not even Caitlin, knows you have this..."

"And there you have it," Sirius finished. "The tale of how I ended up married to Caitlin Tyler, and where that key I gave you came from too. What? Stop looking at me like that!"

Marlie was staring at him, wrinkling her nose. "You slept with Medea Tyler."

"Yeah," said Sirius, shrugging. "So?"

"You slept," said Marlie deliberately, "with Caitlin's mum. Your mother-in-law! Who was, like, twice your age!"

"So? She was fit! And we were both under a lot of emotional strain. And she wasn't my mother-in-law at the time either. So there!"

Marlie grimaced at the idea of Sirius having sex with a nearly fifty year old, no matter how allegedly attractive.

"You are disgusting," Marlie snapped. Sirius rolled his eyes.

"And you, my little kitten, are an uptight prude, but I don't whine about it, do I?" He leaned forward, changing the subject. "So, Deanna remembers me? What does she remember? How much? When can I see her?" He grinned eagerly, desperate to see his stepdaughter again.

"Hold on," Marlie raised her hand, cutting him off. "There's a slight problem here. You're forgetting the whole wanted criminal thing."

"Yeah, but I didn't do it-" Sirius started, before Marlie cut him off.

"She doesn't know that," Marlie said softly. "Sirius, I'm sorry, but you can't see her. Or rather, she won't want to see you. If I know Deanna, and believe me, I do, the only thing she'll want from you is your head on a plate. Don't think that she's going to remember who you are, come and find you and be your little girl again. She won't. So get those little father-daughter fantasies out of your head, because until you've cleared your name, she's not your daughter. She's planning to kill you, and what is more, she can do it." Marlie stared at Sirius, willing him to see the danger. "Padfoot, Caitlin has been training her as a warrior since she was three years old. She sleeps with an axe under her pillow. She earned a black belt before she was even at Hogwarts, and she's vicious when she fights. She's good with her wand too, and while I don't think she knows any really lethal curses, she's very creative with the legal ones she does know. She's a warrior, Sirius. And she wants to kill you."

Sirius stared back, the smile fading. He looked away, looking and feeling lost.

"She wants to kill me," Sirius whispered, his eyes bleak. Marlie nodded.

"She's my little girl," he said quietly. "And she hates me." Marlie said nothing, afraid of how he might react. Sirius turned away, folding his arms on the back of the sofa, lowering his head to the back of his hands and digesting this knowledge in silence, broken only by what might be a sob.

"I used to tell her stories, you know," Sirius whispered, his voice muffled. "Used to give her piggyback rides, and sing her nursery rhymes, and bring her toys. She was the centre of my world, you know? And even though things weren't always rosy with her mum, I never stopped caring about Deanna, never. And now you say she'd like to kill me?" He broke off, biting back a sob.

"Padfoot," Marlie whispered, her heart aching for him. Moving closer, she began to stroke his hair, comforting him as best she could.

"It's too late, kitten," Sirius said sadly. "Even if I clear my name, there's nothing left for me now. I'll still be on my own. Deanna doesn't want me in her life, Caitlin definitely doesn't want me in hers, Harry barely remembers me, and everyone else is

dead, or gone who knows where. I've got no one, kitten, no one. And even if I actually prove myself innocent, I will still have no one."

"That's not true," said Marlie, taking one of his hands in her free hand, while the other slid around his shoulders. "You've got me."

Sirius did look up then, tears still fresh on his cheeks. Despite this, he managed a smile. "Yeah," he replied. "Yeah, I got you." Sitting up, he opened his arms and pulled her into a hug, kissing her on the cheek and stroking her hair. "You won't leave me as well, will you?" he asked nervously.

"Try stopping me," Marlie grinned, leaning in to his chest, finding it surprisingly comfortable. "Sorry, but you're stuck with me."

Sirius couldn't help but smile at that, even though he very much doubted she meant it in anything other than a friendly way. Even so, he had an attractive woman in his arms, and was determined to enjoy it while it lasted. They stayed like that for a while, until Sirius broke the hug.

"You should be getting back, you know," he told her. "Aren't they having a party for you back in Slytherin-land? What with you winning the match and all?"

"Been delayed," Marlie replied. "Felt tacky celebrating with Deanna in hospital. Don't you worry, I'll be along later. Hardly likely to miss it, am I? Not when it's my sixteenth birthday party too."

"Sixteenth birthday - when was that?" Sirius demanded. "You didn't tell me it was your birthday!"

"On the 25th. Three days ago."

"THREE DAYS AGO?!" Sirius stared at her, dismayed. "Why didn't you tell me? I'd have done something special for you! Cooked you dinner or something."

Marlie glanced around the Shack which, while now warm, clean and habitable, was still fairly basic. Admittedly, it now had a Self-Cleaning Chamber Pot in one corner, screened for privacy, and a Perpetually-Full washbasin, complete with a Never-Filthy towel and Undissolving Soap, but the cooking facilities were limited to a Smokeless Ever-Burning Fire in the fireplace, and some very basic utensils pinched from the kitchens.

"Dinner consisting of what, exactly?"

"I'll have you know fricasseed squirrel's very nice," Sirius protested. Marlie screwed up her face in disgust.

"Hey, don't knock it until you've tried it," said Sirius knowingly. "Anyway, back to your birthday. Happy 16th, and I'm sorry I didn't get anything organised for you. When my name is cleared, I promise I'll take you out and make up for it."

"Will you now," said Marlie sceptically. However, she felt rather pleased that he was offering. More than anyone else was, even if she would have to wait for however long it took to get him cleared.

"Yes, I will," said Sirius firmly. "Well, unless your boyfriend objects of course."

Marlie looked away, slightly ashamed by her single status. Why, oh why, did everyone always assume she was spoken for?

"Kitten?" Sirius asked, anxiously. Had he offended her? He lowered her voice to barely above a whisper. "Marlie? Something wrong?" He stroked her hair with the back of his fingers, willing her to at least talk to him.

"There isn't one," she said finally.

"Isn't what?" Sirius asked.

"A boyfriend," Marlie snapped. "There's never been a boyfriend. I'm single, and looking that way for some time. No one is interested in me, no one's ever been interested in me, and for all I know, they might never be. I'll probably end up dying a virgin."

"I very much doubt that," Sirius heard himself saying.

"It's true though," Marlie pouted. "I've only ever been asked out once, and it ended really badly."

"Doesn't mean it won't work out next time though," said Sirius gently, squeezing her shoulder. "I mean, you're sixteen and single. You've got your whole life ahead of you. And I'm sure you won't die a virgin. Just because most of the boys at Hogwarts appear to be blind or gay, doesn't mean there's no one out there who wants you."

"You reckon?" Marlie asked half-heartedly.

"Yes I do," said Sirius firmly. "Hey, if I'd been at Hogwarts with you, I'd have asked you out."

That got Marlie's attention. "You would?" She looked up at him, apparently stunned. "Really?"

"Yes, really. C'mon, you must know you're gorgeous."

"Well, of course," Marlie purred, flinging her hair back. "It's just that no one else appears to have noticed."

"Oh I bet they have," Sirius told her. "They're probably just too shy to say anything. Or they think you can't possibly be interested in them. Or like me, they think you've surely already got a boyfriend. Whatever, you've probably got heaps of admirers. You just need to find out who they are and ask them out."

"I could?" It dawned on Marlie that maybe she'd been thinking about this whole boyfriend thing in completely the wrong way. "I mean, I suppose I could..." Then a thought occurred to her. "What if they say no?"

Sirius shrugged. "It's a risk you gotta take. At least you'll know for sure. If they turn you down nicely, just shrug and walk away."

"What if they turn me down horribly?" asked Marlie, a few nasty thoughts of being publicly laughed at lingering in her mind.

"Walk away, bitch to your friends, plot revenge. It's what most women do," Sirius replied with a grin. Marlie had to laugh at that.

"You sound like you speak from experience," she observed. Sirius had the grace to cough and look away.

"Don't know what you mean," he said innocently. "Prongsy, on the other hand, could probably tell you all sorts of stories... well, if he was still around, anyway." Sirius fell silent for a moment, remembering his former best friend. Marlie watched him, remembering what he'd said earlier.

"Did you mean it?" she asked softly.

"Mean what?" Sirius asked absently.

"Mean it when you said you'd have asked me out if we'd been at school together."

"What? Oh yeah, course," said Sirius dismissively, as if it was obvious. "You'd have spent half your schooldays trying to get rid of me. You'd have probably wanted to kick my head in by the end of it." He looked up and smiled sadly at her. "It's alright, you're perfectly safe. I know you're hardly interested in an old guy like me, and I've got bugger all to offer a woman at the moment."

"You've got the vault full of Galleons," Marlie reminded him. Sirius laughed, but did not smile.

"Yeah, but it's not much good if we can't settle down and enjoy it, is it?" he pointed out. He patted her shoulder in a gesture of friendship. "Kitten, you're very pretty. And in another time and place, you wouldn't have to worry about finding a boyfriend, because my younger self would be camping outside your common room until you said yes." Marlie giggled at this. Sirius grinned back before resuming. "But in the mean time, you keep looking. Because I refuse to believe none of the boys at Hogwarts fancy you." Lucky bastards, Sirius thought to himself. Being able to watch her, talk to her, ask her out, kiss her, touch her, be seen with her, and not taking advantage of it? Truly, the boys of Hogwarts had gone insane. And here he was, sitting right across from her, and if he tried anything, she'd probably shriek at him to get off her. And even if she didn't, even if by some miracle she thought he wasn't a filthy pervert, what sort of life could he possibly offer her? It was this, more than anything, that stopped him from making any kind of move; the knowledge that she deserved far better than him. And yet, he couldn't stop fantasising about running his hands through that

gorgeous hair, kissing those adorable pink lips, taking her head in his hands and guiding her downwards... Bloody hell, Padfoot, stop that at once! No way to think about the kid, no way at all. And yet, the thought

that she was now sixteen and over the age of consent, and not only that but unattached, simply would not go away...

"So, I take it Slytherin's going to have one of its legendary parties tonight then?" said Sirius, in a desperate bid to change the subject. "I mean, of course Harry would have kicked your arse had the Dementors not turned up, but I don't suppose that'll bother any of you-ow!" Marlie had punched him on the arm.

"What do you mean, he'd have kicked my arse?" Marlie snapped, furious. "Like hell! I was at least two lengths ahead of him, and my broom's faster anyway!"

"Yeah, but he's a better flier," Sirius grinned, clearly enjoying winding her up.

"My arse."

"C'mon, the kid's a prodigy, everyone knows that."

"No," Marlie countered, "he's just lucky. Well, OK, not that lucky considering people have tried to kill him every time he's played us..."

"But enough about your Beaters," Sirius quipped, dodging another slap from Marlie. "So how is he anyway? Harry, I mean, not that psychotic blond Beater."

Marlie decided not to defend her brother's... enthusiastic... playing style. "Harry's OK. Came round not long after Tyler did. His broom's not so good though. After he fell off, the wind blew it away, and it got into a little fight with the Whomping Willow."

Sirius winced. "Ow. Anything left of it?"

"Nope. In more pieces than an IKEA wardrobe."

"Poor sod," said Sirius sympathetically. "Never mind. Caitlin's going to buy him a new and better one, right?"

"No," Marlie grinned. "The stubborn git won't tell her he's broken it. He doesn't want to be indebted to her."

"Indebted to-" Sirius stopped, not sure he was hearing this. "What do you mean, indebted to her? How can you be indebted to your legal guardian, they're meant to spend money on you! Last I heard, Caitlin wasn't the stingy type, and she's never wanted to have kids in her

debt!" He noticed the evasive way Marlie was shifting in her seat. "Kitten, she's not like that now, is she?"

"No," Marlie replied uneasily. "No, she paid for mine in fact. But Sirius, Harry doesn't know that she's not like that. He doesn't really know her at all. She... she's not his legal guardian, Sirius. Harry grew up with his aunt and uncle."

"His aunt and uncle?" Sirius frowned. "But Prongsy was an only child, he doesn't have any-" He stopped, eyes widening. "Hang on. Not his Muggle aunt and uncle." Marlie nodded. "Not Lily's sister and her lot," Sirius said, staring at her. Marlie could only admit that, yes, Harry had indeed been raised by Petunia and Vernon Dursley.

"THOSE TWO??" Sirius exploded. Marlie shrank back, eyes shut. The wrath of Black was not pleasant to behold.

"BUT THEY HATE MAGIC!" Sirius roared. "WHO THE BOLLOCKING BLOODY HELL THOUGHT IT WAS A GOOD IDEA TO SEND HARRY TO LIVE WITH THEM??"

"I don't know," Marlie whispered. "The Ministry?" This only provoked another tirade of abuse.

"THAT SODDING MINISTRY COULDN'T FIND A GOOD HOME FOR ITS OWN ARSEHOLE, NEVER MIND MY LITTLE HARRY!" Sirius yelled. "What the hell were they involved for anyway?" he demanded. "Lily and Prongs had a perfectly good will, with witnesses and everything! I should know, I was one of them! And that will stated that in the event of Lil and Prongs dying before Harry came of age, Caitlin and I should be guardians!"

Marlie shook her head. "Not according to Deanna. According to her, the will disappeared so they were regarded as dying intestate. So Harry had to go to his nearest blood relatives."

Sirius shook his head as he collapsed back into a chair. "No fucking way. Unbe-sodding-lievable. No one can touch a magical will if they're not the named executor..." He froze, blue eyes turning to ice. "Albus bloody Dumbledore. He's got it. He's bloody got it, I know it."

"He has?" said Marlie faintly.

"Course he has, he's executor. That manipulative old..." Sirius's glare could have killed on the spot. "Right. Soon as I've cleared my name, that's it. I'm suing the bastard. I want that will and I want guardianship. He's going to stand up in a court of law, and state exactly what happened to a magical will which Portkeys itself to the executor as soon as the deceased snuff it, and why Caitlin didn't get Harry twelve years ago. I mean it, kitten! I will!"

"Yes, Sirius," Marlie soothed him, a little unnerved by the display of rage. "You will, and I'll help you, but let's calm down first, eh? That's right, just calm down, just breathe, that's right. Breathe, Sirius, breathe." Easing herself behind him, she began to massage his shoulders, reasoning that even if it didn't work, she was probably safer behind Sirius than in front of him. As she did so, Sirius's rage began to subside, as he leaned back into her, eyes closed and breathing slowing down.

"Yeah," he murmured. "Yeah, you're right, this ain't gonna help Harry. Left a bit, kitten, that's right. And a bit harder, yeah, perfect." He frowned, clearly thinking. "So no broom then."

"No," Marlie replied, kneading his upper back.

"And he'll need one before the next match in, when, February? Or Gryffindor are buggered, and we can't have that."

Marlie tactfully didn't say anything, letting Sirius pursue his thoughts.

"And Cait's not going to get him one, because she doesn't know he needs one," Sirius continued. "And no one else is going to buy him one, and he can't afford his own, the Potters were rich, but not Tyler-or-Malfoy-rich. He did manage to get his hands on Prongsy's vault, didn't he?"

"Yeah, he's got money," Marlie replied. "He always has new robes anyway, and the full set of textbooks new, and Malfoy only directs his insults about poor people at Ron, so I think Harry's got access to a wizarding vault. Certainly his aunt and uncle aren't buying him anything."

"Bet they're not," Sirius muttered, shifting uneasily. Sitting up, he turned around to face her. "Here, let me. You're the one who's been playing Quidditch, not me. Your turn to be pampered." Getting up, he pulled Marlie to her feet, before sitting on the sofa and positioning her in front of him. Flexing his fingers, he began to rub her shoulders and back. Marlie squirmed under his touch, amazed at how her aching muscles reacted to his touch. Already she could feel the soreness starting to fade.

"Oh, yes please," she moaned softly. "Just like that. Oh... god, Padfoot, that's incredible..." She tilted her head back, eyes shut. This was probably a good thing, because otherwise she would have noticed the way he was staring at her, watching her every movement intently, and with something in his eyes that spoke of far from innocent intentions.

"Do you like it?" he murmured. Marlie nodded, gasping as his thumbs began to draw little circles in the back of her neck.

"Where did you learn to do this?" she whispered.

"Practice, dear kitten, practice," Sirius grinned, thoroughly enjoying himself. God, but she looked and felt amazing. Part of him felt slightly guilty about taking advantage like this, but on the other hand, as long as he didn't touch any erogenous zones, he was probably fairly safe.

"Although in actual fact, it's usually my thighs and bum that get it worse," Marlie mused, entirely unaware of the thoughts that had suddenly filled Sirius's mind. She did however notice that he'd stopped rather suddenly. "What's up?"

Sirius laughed, shaking his head. "Nothing, kitten, nothing. It's just that if I massaged you there, you'd kill me." Although it would certainly be worth it... Sirius hastily banished that line of thinking. Bad Padfoot. Naughty Padfoot. Down boy. He concentrated on rubbing her shoulders, thumbs stroking the base of her neck. Marlie began to purr, thoroughly enjoying the feeling.

"So he needs a broom," Sirius continued. "And by February. And as his godmother won't be obliging, thanks to Harry's bloody-mindedness, looks like it's down to us."

"Down to us?" Marlie asked, eyes flicking open. Oh dear. Sirius had a plan, and it involved her. This was never good.

"Yep. Kitten, I'm buying him a broom."

"You are?" Marlie asked warily.

"Oh yeah," Sirius nodded as he began working on her lower back, hands resting on her waist while his thumbs rubbed her lumbar region. He was resting his head against hers now, lips mere centimetres from her ear. Marlie could feel his breath on her neck, and for reasons she would rather not look into, the whole experience was doing the opposite of relaxing her. However, the thought of telling him to stop didn't occur to her either.

"I want the best for my little godson," Sirius murmured in her ear. "I've been neglecting him. Why, he's not had any birthday or Christmas presents off me for years. I think he's owed something to make up for it all. What with it being nearly Christmas and all. Don't you think so, little kitten?"

"I, er, well, um, maybe?" Marlie babbled, feeling the facility for rational thought leaving her. All she could really process was fingers on her

back and a testosterone laden presence literally breathing down the back of her neck.

"I think so," Sirius replied, feeling rather pleased with himself. Now if he were a little less scrupulous, this little kitten could be his for the taking... except his pain-in-the-arse conscience would never let him hear the end of it. He decided to restrain himself to having her melting in his arms. Hey, after twelve years without even being allowed to induce his own orgasms for fear it would bring the Dementors running, enjoying close physical proximity to a sexy young thing wasn't too much to ask, was it?

"I think," Sirius growled, "that I'm going to buy him the biggest, baddest, fastest, bestest broom on the market."

"Bestest isn't a word-" Marlie began, but she found herself cut off as Sirius grabbed her by the waist and pulled her to him.

"Don't correct my grammar when I'm busy massaging you," he scolded gently. He released his grip, but Marlie was still acutely aware of his arms wrapped around her, and his chin resting on her shoulder. "Now, kitten," he continued, breath hot on her earlobe, "you've still got my key, haven't you? Good. And they still do those special trips to Diagon Alley for fifth years and older, don't they?"

"Y-yes," Marlie whispered, super aware of Sirius's hands being just about the only thing keeping her upright at the moment.

"Excellent," Sirius breathed, in a voice that made her gasp involuntarily. She heard him chuckle at her reaction. "Kitten, you'll order a broom for my little godson, won't

you? A nice, fast, sexy one?" He squeezed her waist that bit tighter. "Go on, kitten," he coaxed, flexing his fingers and rubbing her back with his thumbs. "Say you will. Say you'll do it. Do it for me." She felt the tip

of his nose begin to nuzzle her hair. Oh god, Sirius, I don't know what the hell you think you're doing... but don't stop doing it.

"Yes," she heard herself whimper. In an instant, Sirius's entire demeanour changed.

"Yay!" he yelled, enveloping her in a bear hug that nearly crushed her. "Thanks, kitten! You're the best!" He kissed the top of her head, then let her go, folding his arms and leaning away from her. "OK, I'm done. You can get up now."

Blinking, Marlie moved away, trying to work out what on earth had just happened, and what exactly she'd just agreed to. As her disarrayed thoughts finally came together, one inescapable conclusion couldn't help but force its way forward.

"You total bastard!" Marlie yelled, turning on him. "You used me!"

Sirius stared back at her, lost for words. Oh god. I went too far. She hates me. Oh god.

"All the massaging," Marlie was fuming, pacing up and down the Shack, "all the compliments, all the making me feel nice, you didn't mean it all, did you? You just wanted me to help shoot down Slytherin's chances and get Harry a new broom!"

Thank God, thank god, thank god, she hasn't realised about the cheap sexual gratification. "I'm sorry, kitten," he pouted, fluttering his eyelashes. "I wasn't sure you'd say yes otherwise. You won't change your mind, will you?" He looked hopefully at her. Marlie was glaring back, unmoving. However, Sirius was a past master at emotional blackmail. "But if you don't want to, I suppose I can't force you," Sirius sighed. "Harry'll just have to do without. Shame, really. He would have been so happy too. Imagine his little face, on Christmas morning, unwrapping his new broom, which he's been desperate for for ages. Just imagine how pleased he'd have been. But if you'd rather all he had was a lump of coal from his horrible relatives..." Sirius let his voice trail off, but he need not have worried. Marlie was still annoyed, but the battle was won.

"Alright, alright," she sighed. "I'll order him a broom. Anonymously of course."

"Of course," Sirius grinned, inwardly relieved that he'd not inadvertently ruined things with her. "Thanks, kitten. You're the best!"

Marlie muttered something as she reached for her bag. "Nearly forgot," she said. "Nabbed you some party food. Here you go. Egg sandwiches, chicken drumsticks, sausages on cocktail sticks, cheese on cocktail sticks, ham sandwiches, turkey cuts, couple of scotch eggs, and a bottle of Butterbeer." She laid a serviette on the table as she said this, and set the food out on top of it, with the Butterbeer off to one side. "Voila. Dinner is served."

"You spoil me," Sirius said as he slid into a chair. Before eating, he turned to look at Marlie one last time. "Thanks," he said softly. "You're a good mate, you know that?"

Marlie rolled her eyes. "Yeah, too good sometimes." She gathered her things and prepared to leave. "I'll leave you to it. I've got a party to get back to."

"No problem. Kitten, about earlier..." Sirius's conscience was once more starting to nag at him. Marlie waved him away.

"Don't mention it. Besides," and here she couldn't help grinning, "I rather liked it, to tell you the truth." She winked at him in a way that could only be described as flirtatious. Sirius choked on the mouthful of food he'd just taken.

"I bet you did, you cheeky minx," he managed to get out. "Go on, go. Have fun at your party."

"I'm sure I will," Marlie grinned as she left. "So many boys, so little time..." Waving a somewhat stunned Sirius goodbye, she slipped out, closing the trapdoor behind her.

Chapter Twenty One No Secrets From A Seer

By the time Marlie made it back to the common room, Deanna had been released from the hospital wing and was back amongst her housemates. Well, some of them anyway. On returning, she'd greeted everyone's salutations distractedly and called Rianne and Luella to her, frowning at the news that Marlie had gone out and not yet returned. All three had then taken off for their dormitory and not yet reappeared.

"Tyler seemed a little annoyed you weren't there," Mike added.

"And Martin looks suspicious and all," Draco volunteered.

"But don't worry," Luna giggled, a glass of punch in her hand. "It's Rianne you really want to watch out for. She's dangerous."

Marlie sighed. "Great. Honestly, all I do is go out for a walk, and they're all thinking I'm up to something." Which was true, but... Marlie shivered, trying to banish the memory of Sirius's fingers on her back, fighting the temptation to run back to the Shack and beg him to massage her again and not stop. But no. She had to return to the real world at some point. She glanced at the glass in Luna's hand and blinked in shock. Everyone knew what Slytherin fruit punch was like. Most of it wasn't fruit.

"Michael," she began, "did you know Luna's been on the punch?" Apparently not, as he spun round to face his Ravenclaw cousin, grabbing the drink off her.

"Luna, where did you get this? The punch was under lock and key waiting for the party to restart!" A glance around the room indicated it still was.

"Found it," Luna replied innocently. Michael turned from his Ravenclaw cousin to his Slytherin one.

"Draco Malfoy, have you been giving Luna punch??"

Draco began unsuccessfully protesting his innocence, as Luna hiccupped and started giggling again. And as her two male relatives started having a spectacular row, Marlie slipped off to see what awaited her.

"Where have you been?" Luella demanded as soon as she walked in. "You've been gone for over an hour! And don't tell me you were visiting Deanna; according to her, you never turned up anywhere near the hospital wing."

Marlie shrugged. She'd been expecting this. "I tried. Pomfrey wouldn't let me in. Said she needed to recover. So I went for a walk. Didn't feel like socialising."

"Not like you," Rianne murmured. Marlie shrugged again.

"Yeah, well, Deanna's not usually ill in hospital, is she?" She turned her attention on to Deanna. "So how are you now? Are you alright?"

Deanna didn't answer. She was sitting cross-legged on her bed, staring at the floor, being held by Luella.

"I had a dad once," she said softly. "Not just a biological father. A proper dad. Who told me stories and tucked me in at night and did dad stuff."

Marlie somehow remembered to look surprised at this. "What? You had a dad?" she gasped. "No way, really? What happened? Who was he?"

"Mum wanted me to have a dad," said Deanna. "A family. Didn't want me asking questions about my real father. So she married a friend of hers."

"A friend?" Marlie asked, schooling herself to look properly shocked at the answer.

Deanna finally met her eyes. "Sirius Black."

"Sirius- no!" Marlie gasped. "You're Sirius Black's stepdaughter? Oh my god. Oh my god, no wonder your mum was so freaked when he escaped. Jesus. Sirius Black? God."

"Yeah," said Deanna softly. "Same guy who betrayed my family. That's him."

"Whoa," Marlie breathed, as if this was news to her. She sat down on the bed, on Deanna's other side. "How are you coping? I mean, that's gotta be tough, knowing that Sirius Black's your-"

"Mum's ex-husband," Deanna interrupted. Marlie shrank back involuntarily from the coldness she saw there. "Just some stupid mistake she made when she was young and vulnerable. That's all he is. All he'll ever be. And not even that for long."

I was right. Poor Padfoot, it'd break his heart to see this. "What do you mean not for long?" Marlie whispered, heart in her mouth.

"I'm going to kill him," said Deanna casually, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "If he's lucky, he won't know what hit him. If he isn't..." She shrugged, a malicious smile curving its way on to her face, a terrifying sight in one so young.

"No! You can't!" Marlie heard the words, and realised they came from her. Forcing back the pain that visions of Sirius lying dead brought, she hastily fought to cover herself, fully aware of Luella's glare and Rianne's oddly knowing look.

"He'll kill you," Marlie whispered. "He's a grown wizard, ex-Auror, it was all your mum could do to beat him to a draw, you don't stand a chance! Oh, Deanna!" She threw her arms around her friend, burying her head in Deanna's hair so she wouldn't have face the scrutiny of the other two.

"Marlie!" Deanna said in surprise, stroking her friend's hair. "Don't... look, it'll be alright. I didn't mean to scare you!"

Marlie finally risked looking up. Deanna actually appeared concerned.

"Please don't do anything stupid," Marlie whispered. "Don't throw your life away over something as petty as revenge. Don't go looking for him! I mean, if he comes after you, fine, but don't, please, don't try and hunt

him down. He's not worth it. Please, Tyler, promise me," she begged her friend, "promise me you'll leave him for the Aurors! Promise me you'll leave him for your mum!"

Deanna stared back at her for a few tense moments, before smiling and pulling Marlie into her arms.

"Alright, alright, you daft thing, you. If it'll stop you worrying, I promise I won't go after him unless I actually see the guy. Happy?"

Marlie smiled, relieved. Well, not entirely, but at least it meant that Sirius was safe unless he did something stupid. Not that Marlie had any hopes of that working as a long-term solution - doing something stupid was practically Padfoot's reason for being. But at least she was reasonably confident of keeping Sirius under control - most of the time anyway.

"Come on," said Deanna, pulling Marlie to her feet. "Let's get to the party. Let's forget about him. Screw the bastard. We've got a victory to celebrate!" And with that, she led Marlie out, closely followed by Luella. Last in line was Rianne... who was looking very thoughtful. Yes, Marlie was going to bear very careful watching. Very careful watching indeed.

Slytherin parties have a certain reputation, and this was no exception. The punch flowed freely. There was much consumption of food, and a goodly supply of Butterbeer. And Marlie Lovegood in particular, addled by alcohol, hormonally charged from Sirius's earlier ministrations, and buoyed up by the confidence that came from having spent the entire evening being the undivided centre of attention, was determined to find herself a good time.

"Come on, I've seen the way you've been watching me when you think I'm not looking," she purred in Chris Bryant's ear. "How about it, hmm?"

You and me, that nice little café in Hogsmeade, get to know each other a little better, what do you say?"

Chris had the look of a very small animal caught in the light of a very large pair of headlights. "I, er, well, um, that is to say, I can't," he finished hastily.

Marlie blinked. "Why not?" It hadn't occurred to her that someone might turn her down.

"I - I've taken a chastity vow," he said triumphantly, in the tone of voice of someone who's just come up with an instant brilliant suggestion. "Over the summer. I've seen the light and am saving myself for marriage. So I can't date you as it'd be too tempting. Sorry, Marls."

"Chastity vow, my arse," Marlie muttered, glaring at him. However, it seemed Chris wasn't the only one. All of a sudden, it seemed every boy in Slytherin had either turned gay, acquired a mysterious foreign or Muggle girlfriend, taken a chastity vow, or had run off in panic at the mere sight of her. Very odd. Even odder was the sheer relief in their eyes as they found an excuse not to date her. There was a reason for all this, Marlie was sure. She'd even chatted up a few of the older fourth years out of desperation, but they'd reacted the same way. Finally, feeling very fed up, she went in search of one boy who just might have some answers.

"Oi, Lucas!" Marlie snapped, marching over to where Lucas and Rianne were curled up in a chair together, sipping the punch and cuddling. "I want a word with you!"

Both Lucas and Rianne growled in annoyance at being interrupted.

"What do you want, Lovegood?" Lucas snapped. "Can't you see we're busy?"

"Yeah, Marlie, go and find yourself a boyfriend of your own," Rianne smirked.

"I've been trying all evening," Marlie seethed. "For some reason, every time I so much as talk to a boy, they all run off in terror! Either that or invent some excuse to get rid of me. They can't all be gay, and I find it highly unlikely that they've all joined True Love Waits over the summer."

"You never know, they might have," Lucas said innocently. "Who knows what sort of weird ideas Bryant might have been fed by his parents during the holidays? You know what Muggles are like, after all. There're some very strange cults out there, especially the weird evangelical ones from America."

"Lucas," said Marlie savagely, "his mother's Jewish!" She leaned forward, eyes flashing fire, staring straight at Lucas. "You are going to tell me what is really going on, and you are going to tell me now or mate's boyfriend or no, you are going to find yourself running in fear for your knackers!"

"Such language," Lucas tutted. "Where do you pick these things up from, I wonder?"

Marlie tried not to blush. She hadn't meant to be quite so vulgar as all that. Spending all that time hanging around the notoriously foul-mouthed Sirius Black was evidently rubbing off on her. She'd have to watch herself.

"Must be all the Quidditch," Lucas mused. "Flinty's obviously getting to you. Surprised your brother hasn't lodged a complaint yet. Strange, he's normally very protective."

Something in his eyes got Marlie's attention. "Protective?" she said sharply. "Protective how?" She remembered Sirius's comment about her brother's Quidditch style earlier. It was true too - her brother could be violent when provoked.

"Protective enough to warn us all off even thinking about dating you at the beginning of fourth year," Lucas grinned. "Very inventive with the threats, your brother. Put the fear of god into us all. No wonder everyone else is afraid to go near you."

"He- he's threatened all the other Slytherin boys if they date me?" Marlie whispered.

"Yep. Everyone from fourth year up," Lucas grinned. "And I think he's done the other houses too."

"The other... You mean that, thanks to my brother, every boy in the school is now too frightened to go out with me??" Marlie demanded.

"Seems so," Rianne grinned. "Sorry, Marls. Sucks to be you, eh?"

Marlie didn't answer. She'd already stormed off after her brother.

"MICHAEL!!!" she screamed, hands on her hips. "GET OVER HERE RIGHT NOW!!!"

Mike extricated himself from the conversation he was having with the rest of the team.

"Something up, sis?"

"Did you threaten all the other boys in the school with physical violence if they went anywhere near me??" Marlie shouted.

Mike shuffled on the spot, looking sheepishly away. "Not quite," he said, guiltily.

"What do you mean, not quite??" Marlie yelled at him, seething.

"I might have missed some of the Hufflepuffs."

"You might have missed- MICHAEL LOVEGOOD, YOU COMPLETE AND UTTER TWAT!" Marlie screeched, causing those nearby to cover their ears and take cover. Barely pausing for breath, she grabbed a nearby lava lamp and hurled it at her brother's head. Mike evaded it with ease, as it smashed into the hard stone wall, the liquid and pieces of metal sliding to the ground. However, he couldn't evade the wrath of his little sister.

"You have ruined my life!" Marlie shouted, face flushed with fury. "Thanks to you, not one single boy in school is going to be interested. NOT ONE! I'm going to be single for the rest of my school life! I'm going to be a complete social outcast! Tyler's going to be getting more than me! No offence, Deanna."

"None taken," Deanna drawled. It was an open secret that Deanna Tyler viewed the whole dating and boys arena with nothing less than thinly veiled horror and distaste.

"My life is over," Marlie whispered, viewing her chances of getting a shag before graduating slowly dying before her eyes. She glared at her brother. "And it is all your fault!"

"Don't be an idiot, sis, I'm just looking out for you, that's all," Mike snapped, removing lava lamp fluid from his robes. "You don't see the way some boys look at you, you don't hear the talk I do! I thought they needed reminding to show a little more respect around you."

"A little respect?" Marlie seethed. "I don't believe I'm hearing this! What is this, Saudi Arabia or something?" She stormed over to him, eyes inches from his. "You are my brother, Mike Lovegood, not my jailer! And if I want to have a boyfriend, it is none of your business!"

"You don't have to hear them talk," Mike growled. Marlie, furious, grabbed him by the shirt.

"No," she hissed. "But your ego is not my problem!" She let him go, shrugging. "Well, congratulations, brother dearest. You have completely destroyed my chances of finding a suitable boyfriend." She shot him a smirk before turning away - the battle might be lost, but the war was far from over. "I'll just have to find an unsuitable one instead. Pleasant dreams, Michael." And with that, she flounced out.

"It's not funny!" Marlie yelled, flinging her bag to the floor.

Sirius barely managed to stop laughing long enough to form a coherent answer. It was now Sunday morning, the day after the match, and Marlie had stormed straight over to rant about her brother.

"Sorry, kitten," he gasped through the giggles. "Oh dear. Brothers, eh?" He wiped the tears from his eyes. "Has he really threatened all of them?"

"Most of them," Marlie sulked. "He thinks he may have missed some of the Hufflepuffs."

This only set Sirius off laughing even more, lying back on the couch, flinging his head back and howling.

"Stop laughing!" Marlie shouted, going pink. "It's not funny! He's ruined my life!"

"Some of the Hufflepuffs, oh god," Sirius wheezed. "Never mind, eh, kitten. Just because they're not all glamour gods, doesn't mean they've got nothing to offer, does it - ow!" Marlie had grabbed a cushion and hit him with it.

"Shut up," Marlie scowled, folding her arms and curling up on the sofa. "Honestly, I come here hoping for sympathy, and all I get is laughter. You bastard."

"Sorry," Sirius gasped. "I am sympathetic. Really. It's just really bloody funny, that's all!" Another fit of giggles threatened to overwhelm him again.

Marlie folded her arms, glaring. For some reason, the sight of Sirius falling about laughing instead of giving her a hug and fussing over her annoyed her no end.

"I hate you," Marlie muttered. Oddly enough, it was this that killed Sirius's laughter. He looked up, blue eyes no longer dancing.

"You don't, do you? Kitten?" He shuffled nearer, concerned, reaching out to touch her hair - but pausing. If she really hated him... He didn't want to think about that. "Marlie?"

Marlie looked up, still sulking. For a few brief, heartstopping moments, she simply glared at him. Sirius stared back, fully aware he was looking

rather pathetic for an alleged bad-ass Auror type. Then, finally, Marlie began to smile.

"Padfoot, you fool," she sighed, leaning in to him. "You're such a moron, you know that?"

Sirius laughed, relief flooding through him. "It's been said before," he grinned, pulling her next to him for a hug. Marlie, tactile to the last, wasted no time in snuggling up next to him. After all, with a now boyfriendless life stretching out before her, she had to take what she could find.

"Did you give him a piece of your mind then?" Sirius asked.

"Several," Marlie replied. "Bastard. How dare he? What business is it of his anyway?"

"I'm sure he's just looking out for your well-being," Sirius told her.

"He's got a funny way of showing it," Marlie muttered.

"Eh, he's just being protective of his little sis. It's what older brothers do. It's what I'd probably do. If I had a little sister, that is."

"Thank god you don't," Marlie muttered. "Honestly, you don't think he's overreacting just a tiny bit? I hadn't even expressed interest in anyone, and hardly anyone had expressed interest in me, and he's gone and single-handedly wrecked my love life before it even got started!"

"Aw, come on, now who's overreacting?" Sirius teased. "I very much doubt they're all so scared of your brother that they won't go near you."

"All the Slytherins seem to be," Marlie pouted. Sirius just smirked.

"There's your answer then," he said, nudging her. "Date a Gryffindor! Get yourself some hot Lion House Loving. We're brave, and we ain't scared of some two-bit Slytherin Beater either. I promise you, once you've tasted red and gold, there's no looking back."

"Slept with many Gryffindor men, have you?" Marlie shot back.

"Ha ha. Very funny. Although there was that one time with M- never mind," Sirius coughed. Marlie raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. Sirius Black's misspent youth was a subject she'd rather steer clear of.

"Point is," Sirius continued, "your brother ain't God. And you, little kitten, you are worth taking risks for. I'd be very surprised if there isn't anyone out there willing to see you on the sly. Besides, how old is he anyway? He must be nearly ready to graduate by now."

"Next year," said Marlie. "He's seventh year now."

"See?" Sirius grinned. "There you have it! Play the demure little obedient sister for a year, wait until he's gone out into the big wide world, come back to a school free of brotherly surveillance, and Bob's your uncle, you won't be able to move for boys chasing you. By Christmas, you'll be sick of the sight of them."

"God, that's months away!" Marlie cried. "What am I supposed to do until then?"

Sirius ruffled her hair with a smile. "Looks like you'll have to put up with my company instead. Sorry about that." Marlie rolled her eyes but didn't raise any objections. Inwardly, Sirius could barely contain himself, silently thanking Mike Lovegood for his interference. Thanks to him, Marlie wouldn't be able to find a boyfriend her own age until next year... which meant he could look forward to having the kitten all to himself, for now at least.

Meanwhile, back in the Slytherin dorm, Rianne, who had been lying on her bed like one dead, returned to herself and opened her eyes.

"Oh Marlie," she murmured to herself. "What have you done now?"

Of course, Marlie did not stay with Sirius all day. After a while, she'd left to get on with the homework which was due in next week and which had been neglected owing to things Quidditch-related, leaving Sirius alone.

At least, until a little later, while Sirius was washing his hair in what passed for a sink. He'd just finished rinsing the shampoo (one of Marlie's many bottles, with herbal extracts and jojoba oils for extra shine and body) out of his hair, when he heard the trapdoor open.

Shaking the water out of his hair and rubbing it with a towel stolen from one of the Slytherin bathrooms, he sauntered out to see what Marlie wanted now. Deciding to give the little Slytherin a scare, he elected not to bother with putting his shirt back on, instead just letting the towel hang round his shoulders.

"What's up, kitten, can't resist the old Black charm - " The words died on his lips as he realised that the girl before him was not Marlie.

Sirius froze, eyes taking in the Slytherin school uniform, prefect badge, reddish-brown hair, piercing brown eyes staring disapprovingly at him, and a face he'd known once... and later. Or at least, a younger and still uncorrupted version of it. However, Sirius didn't waste time exchanging reminiscences or trying to work out which one of Branwen's daughters it was. Hitting the floor low, he tackled her around the waist before she could finish the hex on her lips, and grabbed her wrists.

"How did you find me?" he snarled at her as he tightened his grip on her wrist, causing her to drop her wand. If Marlie had betrayed him... but no. A deliberate betrayal would have involved Aurors, not one lone prefect. So evidently Marlie must have been getting careless. Surprising. Marlie wasn't the careless type.

"She isn't," the girl snapped back, glaring furiously at him as she tried unsuccessfully to break free. "But she is too damn sentimental for her own good. And as vulnerable as anyone to a bit of charm, a pretty face and the Imperius Curse."

Sirius flinched as if slapped. "I have not used Imperius," he said coldly. "And it'll take a lot more than a make over from Marlie to make me pretty again." He looked at her, something occurring to him. "Except I didn't say that out loud..." He wrenched at her wrists, forcing a cry of

pain from her lips. "You're a Seer, like your mum. You're Branwen's kid. And that's how you found me."

"Oh well done, five points for working that out," the girl hissed.

"Less of the sarcasm, missy," Sirius growled. "You're not really in a position to argue right now, are you?"

The girl just smiled mysteriously at him. "You won't hurt me," she predicted confidently.

Sirius raised an eyebrow. "No? I'm a dangerous criminal on the run for his life. What makes you think I won't kill to keep my secret?"

The girl became very still at that. However, her next words contained not a hint of fear.

"Because you didn't kill Marlie," she said, staring right into his eyes, and yet not seeming to see him at all.

"Yes, you had her right here, on the floor, same as you have me," she said softly. "You had the knife ready to strike, you were going to silence her... but you didn't. You're lowering the knife, confused... and now you're dropping it and backing away, horrified. And then you're huddled in a corner, and your mind is breaking. Falling apart... and it's only thanks to Marlie you're still holding it together. She put you back together." Something seemed to dawn in the girl's eyes, and she began to smile. "You need her, and not just for your practical needs. You need her, because she's what makes life worth living. Because you lost everything, and now she's all you've got to

build a life around." The Seer closed her eyes, concentrating. "No wonder the loyalty bond looked so strong in my dream," she whispered. "You literally can't do without her now. If anything happens to her, you

die too. You would kill to protect her. You would die to protect her." She opened her eyes. "You love her." It was almost an accusation.

Sirius shifted uncomfortably, not wanting to admit that her words might have a grain of truth to them.

"She's a good mate," he said gruffly. "Even if she is just a kid. I like her, and for some reason, she puts up with me. She's helping me out, and in return, when I clear my name, I'm going to spoil the kid rotten."

The girl raised an eyebrow. "Clear your name, eh?" She smiled knowingly at him. "Well, why not?" Her voice softened. "You're not a killer - well, not a murderer anyway. And you're certainly not a traitor. I don't know quite what you are exactly, but one thing is clear. Marlie trusts you, and she's right to do so."

Sirius loosened his grip a little, although he was still wary. "Who the bloody hell are you?" he whispered.

"Didn't I tell you?" she replied innocently. "You know, I don't think I did. Name's Rianne. Rianne Stormosi."

"Rianne Stormosi," Sirius murmured, rolling the syllables around his mind, trying to think if he knew them. "Yeah, I remember. You're the youngest, aren't you? Just a few months old you were when your mum went. Then your dad took you all off to the US to get away from the war - apparently he was worried about reprisals. Particularly worried that the Death Eaters were after you, for some reason. And from the sound of the accent, seems like you stayed there for some time." He flashed her a grin at this.

"I know. I sound like a Yank," Rianne grimaced. "The other girls tell me that all the time. Even Marlie who talks like a Valley Girl herself half the time."

"Don't I know it," Sirius muttered. Slowly, he released Rianne's wrists... before leaping off her in one fluid movement, grabbing her wand from where it was lying on the floor, and positioning himself over the trapdoor, slamming it shut and sitting cross-legged on top of it with a typical Sirius grin on his face.

"That was fast," Rianne admitted as she staggered to her feet. "Didn't see that coming. You're good."

"That's what the ladies tell me," Sirius smirked back.

"Just the ladies?" Rianne purred.

Sirius swiftly changed the subject. "Never you mind. You just tell me who else knows you're here. More to the point, who else knows I'm here?"

"Just me," Rianne replied. "And Marls, obviously. Don't look so worried! Marlie's really been very discreet, you know. If I couldn't astrally project and follow her that way, there's no way I'd have found out about you. And if it weren't for these weird dreams, I wouldn't have suspected. She's very sneaky, our Marls." Rianne sounded oddly proud as she said this.

"Tell me about it," Sirius said, casting an eye around the room. "So what are you going to do when you leave then? Going to tell anyone?"

Rianne paused, scrutinising him very carefully. Finally, she took a deep breath and spoke.

"I will have to talk to Marlie, obviously. And one of our other friends is getting suspicious, so I will have to say something to her. Not that you're here though. Somehow, I think it's best for now if as few people know about you as possible."

"You're keeping quiet?" Sirius hadn't expected that she'd agree so easily.

Rianne nodded. "Yeah. Whatever else you may be, you're trustworthy. I'll keep your secret, don't worry."

Sirius let out a sigh of relief that he hadn't realised he'd been holding. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Rianne grinned. "I've decided you're too cool to turn in." She eyed up the leather trousers Sirius was wearing. "Damn, but Lovegood's a lucky girl. Does she know yet?"

"No she bloody doesn't, and I'll thank you not to tell her," Sirius snapped. "She doesn't see me that way. It'd unsettle her."

"Unsettle her. Right." Rianne privately thought that any unsettlement on Marlie's part would be very swiftly followed by amazement, flattered delight and a swift dragging of Sirius Black into bed before he could change his mind. "If you say so, Sirius." She leaned her head to one side. "So, you gonna let me go then? Only I got stuff to do, responsibilities and things. People'll notice if I'm gone too long, you know?"

"Suppose," Sirius shrugged, getting to his feet. "Promise you won't give me away?"

"Promise," Rianne told him. Apparently satisfied, Sirius threw her wand back, and moved away, kicking the trapdoor open for her.

"Thank you," Rianne replied, making to leave. She turned to him before descending. "Listen, Sirius, I can't give you as much time as Marlie can. I'm a prefect, I have a boyfriend, I actually like to put effort in to my homework unlike some, so I can't come that often." She inclined her head, smiling. "But I will come when I can. It's not good for you to be so dependent on Marlie. Not that she's unreliable or anything, but you need other people too."

"Suppose," Sirius said noncommittally, although it would be nice having someone other than Marlie to talk to. Particularly when it was Marlie he wanted to talk about. "So, I suppose I'll see you around then?"

Rianne's eyes roamed down his bare chest, a lascivious grin appearing on her face. "Oh, you can count on it," she breathed, tweaking one of

Sirius's nipples. Sirius gasped, eyes bulging out. Before he could do or say anything else, however, Rianne was gone, laughter echoing up the corridor.

"Bloody hell," Sirius muttered, rubbing himself where Rianne had touched him. This one was going to be trouble.

Marlie meanwhile was making her way through the corridors in search of the one person who hadn't been involved in the previous day's dramas. She'd not seen him at the match, not at any of the meals in the Great Hall, and obviously, there'd been no lessons. In fact, no one had seen Professor Lupin since Friday.

She knocked on the door of his office, waiting patiently. OK, so chances were good that he wouldn't be in on a Sunday, but you never could tell. Some teachers were occasionally to be found in their offices, working.

Not this time though. No one was answering. Marlie put her ear to the door, listening carefully. Sure enough she could hear someone talking, although the words weren't clear. Someone was in. She knocked again.

"Hello? Professor Lupin? Are you in there? It's me, Marlie."

A pause. Then some muttering, what sounded oddly like a dog whining, and some scuffling, followed by footsteps approaching her. Marlie stepped back, and got the shock of her life when the door opened, and she came face to face with, not Professor Lupin, but Professor Snape.

"Professor Snape?" Marlie asked, surprised. "What are you doing here?"

"I might ask you the same question, Miss Lovegood," he said coldly. "It is the weekend. Professor Lupin is off-duty, and yet here you are, wanting to see him. Do you have a reason for being here, or were you just bored and looking for something to do?"

Now that Marlie had to account for her presence, she suddenly found that a valid reason was eluding her.

"Er... I wanted to ask him a question about my essay on gorgons..." Her voice trailed off under Snape's steely glare. He said nothing, simply raising one eyebrow as he watched her babble.

When he finally decided she wasn't going to say anymore, he cleared his throat and spoke.

"Miss Lovegood, it is my sad misfortune to have to inform you that Professor Lupin is indisposed at present, and not up to seeing any students on any matters whatsoever."

"But he's capable of talking over work with you?" Marlie asked, a little sceptical.

"Not at all," Snape replied with a wry smile. "In fact, he's not really capable of talking with anyone at all at the moment. I am merely here to bring him some potions that help him manage his, er, condition." There was a strange look in his eyes as he said this, a knowing gleam that made it seem almost as if he was laughing at her.

"Oh. But couldn't I just pop in and see how he was?" said Marlie hopefully. It never hurt to ask, after all.

"No," said Snape firmly.

"Why not-" Marlie started to say, but she found herself cut off.

"Miss Lovegood," said Snape pointedly. "I have already told you that Professor Lupin is too ill to see anyone else. If you have an urgent message, I will pass it on, but otherwise, I will have to ask you to leave. Is this quite clear?"

Marlie looked down, sighing. "Yes sir," she muttered. She glanced up hesitantly. "Sir... he will be alright, won't he? I mean, he's not going to die, is he?"

Snape relaxed at this, almost smiling. "No, Miss Lovegood, he is not going to die. He will be fine, as long as he is allowed complete peace and quiet." The emphasis on the last phrase was a clear hint that this

would involve her leaving, preferably immediately. Finally giving up on getting to see Professor Lupin that day, Marlie turned to leave.

Snape closed and warded the door behind her, before turning to the cowering werewolf hiding under the desk.

"It's alright, Lupin. She's gone. You can come out now."

Slowly, the wolf crawled out into the open, looking nervously at him. Smirking at the beast, Snape settled himself into Lupin's chair.

"Well, wolf, it would appear you have an admirer," he sneered. "Who would have thought it, young Miss Lovegood having a crush on you. What is the attraction, I wonder, the threadbare robes or the grey hair?"

The wolf growled a little at this, bumping its nose against Snape's hand. Snape flinched at the contact, withdrawing swiftly from the lycanthrope's touch. The wolf backed off reluctantly, a small whimper escaping its throat.

"Oh, do be quiet, Lupin," Snape snarled, fighting to cover the lump that had suddenly appeared in his throat. "You are ridiculously pathetic sometimes." He resolutely ignored the wolf's sad eyes, staring up at him hopelessly. It was not cute. Not appealing. He did not want to hug it or scratch it behind the ears. No. Not in the

slightest. And tickling its stomach was quite beyond the pale. He was here just to check that the Wolfsbane was working effectively, and not because of any concern for the werewolf's wellbeing. Certainly he wasn't here to spend time in Lupin's company. Gods forbid he actually enjoyed being around the lycanthrope. He returned to marking the essays he'd brought with him.

The damned werewolf sniffled slightly. Snape glared at it. It looked up and met his eyes. It was truly the most forlorn sight he'd ever seen.

"Oh for gods' sake," he muttered. "Alright, alright, come here." The werewolf, eyes brightening, got up and approached him. Grimacing, Snape allowed it to rest its head on his lap as he rubbed it behind the ears.

"This is just to shut you up, you understand," Snape growled. "I am merely putting up with you for the time being out of scientific curiosity and not having anything else to do. So don't get any ideas when you're back in human form."

The werewolf nuzzled him on the thigh before making itself comfortable. Snape could only roll his eyes. This was clearly going to be a long day. However, despite his irritation, it never once occurred to him that he could leave.

"There you are," Marlie heard Rianne calling as she crossed the Entrance Hall. She turned to see Rianne stepping inside the doors.

"Rianne?" Marlie asked, frowning. It wasn't the warmest of days outside, and it was starting to rain. Not weather to be out walking in, and she told Rianne this.

"It was cosy enough where I went," said Rianne calmly as she approached. Marlie watched her suspiciously. There was something in her eyes that wasn't right, and she could feel her hair prickling. Rianne smiled grimly at her. "Nice little love-nest you got there, kitten."

She knows. Fuck. Marlie didn't think twice. "Obliviate!"

Rianne threw herself to the ground before Marlie had even finished casting the hex, collapsing to the floor in a heap. She didn't get up again.

"Rianne?" Marlie whispered, approaching the girl. She still had her wand out - experience had taught her that it was not wise to take chances where Rianne was concerned.

Kneeling down, she turned Rianne over. The other girl moved easily enough, limp and apparently unconscious.

"Fuck it," Marlie whispered. Her Memory Charm hadn't even hit Rianne. What the hell was going on?

"That's better," she heard Rianne say... from behind her. Slowly, one hand still on Rianne's unmoving form, Marlie turned around.

Watching her was the ghostly form of none other than Rianne Stormosi.

"Ri?" Marlie gasped, not sure what she was seeing. Rianne wasn't dead, was she? But no, her body was still breathing. So why was what looked like Rianne's ghost watching her?

Rianne nodded, gliding over to Marlie. "Yeah, it's me. Don't fret, Marls, you never heard of astral projection before?"

"Astral what?" Marlie asked, now utterly confused.

"Astral projection. The ability to leave your body behind and go spirit walking," Rianne sighed. "God, Marlie, don't you ever read?"

"I do sometimes," Marlie snapped, insulted at the suggestion she never did any studying. "About things I'm interested in."

"Like Animagism?" Rianne asked, settling down next to Marlie. Marlie, recalling why she'd tried to hex Rianne in the first place, fingered her wand. How did one Memory Charm what was effectively a ghost anyway?

"Don't bother," Rianne replied curtly. "I know, Marls. I know you're a cat Animaga, although god knows how you managed that one. I know you're looking after Sirius Black in the Shrieking Shack. I know that you're doing it freely too, and that the two of you are quite willing to fight for each other, to the death if necessary, although I hope it won't come to that." Her lips quirked into a smile. "I also know he's not the threat he's made out to be. Don't worry, Marls, no one else knows, although Lu's getting suspicious. You might want to put in some extra face time with us, or at least make sure someone knows where you are. Sirius'll be fine without you for a few nights."

It took a few seconds for Marlie to process this. "Hang on... wait a second... you're not turning him in?"

Rianne shook her head. "No."

"But he's..." Marlie stopped herself. She'd been about to say he was a murderer, although she knew full that he was no such thing.

"He's what?" Rianne probed gently.

"Innocent," Marlie whispered, closing her eyes. "He's innocent." She heard Rianne breathe sharply.

"Don't say any more," she warned Marlie. "No one can see or hear me like this unless I want them to, but you're still visible."

Marlie felt a cold sensation rush past her, causing the hairs on her arm to bristle. Then a soft moan from next to her, as Rianne stirred, opening her eyes and yawning.

"Gods, but that's hard work," she whispered. "Especially going in to it so suddenly. Ack." She blinked, looking at Marlie almost sleepily. "Take me back to the dorm?"

Marlie sighed as she helped Rianne to her feet. "Yeah, come on then. Are you sure you'll keep quiet?" she asked as Rianne steadied herself against her.

"Said I would, didn't I?" Rianne growled.

"What, just like that?" said Marlie suspiciously. "Without proof or the full story or anything?"

"Don't need it," Rianne said softly. "I believe you both. And this is your adventure. Not my place to intervene... not yet anyway."

Something in Rianne's words struck Marlie as odd. It didn't take long for her to realise what it was.

"Both? You've spoken to him?"

"Oh yeah," Rianne grinned, a hungry look in her eyes that Marlie didn't like at all. "He was a little surprised to see me, but we came to an understanding, and he's agreed I can come and see him every so often."

Marlie wasn't at all sure she liked the idea of other people visiting her Sirius.

"Tell you what, you're one lucky girl," Rianne continued. "Sexy guy like that all to yourself, absolute privacy guaranteed... You shagged him yet?"

"WHAT?" Marlie shrieked. "Bloody hell, Rianne! No, of course I haven't! We're just mates!"

"Shame," Rianne purred. "He's going to be gorgeous when he's put some weight on, got himself a tan, got his muscles back. Hell, Marls, if I was single, I'd have jumped him by now."

"You would," Marlie snapped tersely. For some reason, the idea of her and Sirius getting intimate wasn't something she wanted to contemplate. He doesn't want me that way, she reminded herself.

"No?" Rianne murmured in her ear. "I think you could have him if you wanted him, you know."

Marlie turned on Rianne, furious at the invasion of her thoughts.

"Rianne," she hissed, "first, we are just friends, secondly, stop reading my mind!"

"Whatever you say, Marls," Rianne grinned, but she clearly didn't believe the other girl. Marlie glared, but could do no more. She decided to steer the conversation on to safer ground.

"So, aside from visiting him and doing the occasional food drop, you gonna do anything else? Tell anyone else?"

Rianne shook her head. "No. Like I said before, this is your adventure. It's not for me to interfere."

Which on one hand was good, but on the other... "You couldn't use your prefect powers to confiscate Ron Weasley's rat for me then," Marlie asked sadly.

"Fraid not, Marls. Only teachers can do that sort of thing."

"Damn."

Chapter 22 Encounters in Dungeons and Dark Alleys

Monday morning, and the sun was slowly rising, the first rays of daylight chasing the night away... and with it, other things of the dark, as the Beast finally released its monthly hold over Remus Lupin.

Groaning softly, Lupin opened his eyes. The Change back into human form always left him weary, not to mention disorientated. Bleary-eyed, he tried to focus, but the gentle light of early morning wasn't making it easy for him. He was vaguely aware of arms around his shoulders, and someone helping him up, helping him stagger to the bed, before lying him on it and pulling the covers over him, tenderly tucking him in.

"Who's that?" he whispered.

"Hush," a woman's voice replied softly. "Rest now. You're tired. We can talk later."

It sounded familiar, but Lupin couldn't think for the life of him where he'd heard it before. The accent was certainly distinctive enough. He clutched at the few memories he did have of his latest transformation.

"Severus?" he murmured. "Is he there? He was there earlier, I know it."

A man's voice answered from the other side, and this time Lupin did recognise the voice - Severus's baritone was recognisable anywhere.

"Yes, I'm here too, you idiot werewolf. Commendations on remembering, I had no idea you were that bright."

Lupin felt that he ought to be snapping back a retort at that, but somehow his heart wasn't it.

"I love you too, Severus," Lupin grinned sleepily. He closed his eyes and curled up under the duvet, smirking to himself as he heard Severus snarling and walking away. Behind him, he felt someone

else's weight settling on the bed, and a feminine hand stroking his hair back.

"Should I be worried, Severus?" its owner asked.

"Hardly," Severus shot back. "Flea-bitten werewolves are not my type."

"That's a shame," the woman purred, and now Lupin recognised her as Caitlin Tyler - no one else could ooze sensuality like that, "I would have quite fancied a threesome."

An explosion of wordless shock and outrage emanated from Severus's side of the room and a smutty cackle from Caitlin, who Lupin felt slide off the bed.

"Oh Severus, don't be like that, you know I'm just teasing."

Another growl, followed by a girlish squeak.

"You, woman, are impossible."

"But you love me for it."

"Gods know why." However, Severus's mood couldn't be that bad, as this was followed by the unmistakeable sound of kissing. Lupin smiled to himself behind closed eyelids. It was nice to see Severus happy and in love at last - not that he expected the man to change towards him at all. Drowsiness began to overtake him, and he fell back into slumber.

Severus turned and watched the sleeping werewolf, Caitlin still in his arms.

"I have to go now, I have lessons in under two hours. Can I trust you alone with him?" he asked.

"I think so," Caitlin smiled. "It's you he secretly fancies after all." Severus glowered at this.

"Wonderful, that's all I need, a lovesick werewolf mooning after me. Still, at least that would mean he wasn't mooning after young Miss Lovegood, who appears to have developed a crush on him."

"What, again?" Caitlin sighed. She'd heard all about Marlie's idolisation of Gilderoy Lockhart from Deanna. "Honestly, it's like a fetish with her. Still, can't be helped now. Next time, tell Albus to hire an ugly Defence teacher."

"Oh believe me, I will," said Severus grimly. He kissed Caitlin on the cheek. "I will see you tonight?"

"Try keeping me away," Caitlin told him. They kissed again, and then Severus was gone. Caitlin walked back to the bed, where Lupin was now fast asleep.

"This will probably make Severus extremely jealous, but tough," she sighed. "You're not the only one needing sleep, Remus." Climbing on to the bed next to him, she laid her head on the pillow and closed her eyes. Soon she too was asleep.

Some hours later, Lupin finally opened his eyes. Daylight. World in colour. Everything clearly visible and not dominated by smell. He looked at his hands. Hands, not paws. Breathing in relief, he stretched, aching muscles screaming in protest. God, but it was good to be human again. Yawning, he turned around and blinked to see someone lying there. A female someone, namely one Caitlin Tyler.

Lupin rubbed his eyes, wondering if he was imagining things. No, she was still there, fully dressed, stretched out on top of covers, sleeping peacefully with a smile on her face. Lupin regarded her quizzically. While the fact that she was fully dressed indicated that nothing untoward had happened, that didn't change the fact that it was unusual in the extreme for anyone to be around when he Changed, never mind

an attractive woman. Vaguely he recalled his first impressions on changing back. Someone had put him to bed, and he remembered not one but two voices. One must have been Caitlin, while the other could only have been Severus. Clearly, Severus was not here now - if he recalled correctly, today was Monday which meant Severus would be working... but why was Caitlin still here? Leaning over the sleeping witch, he prodded her gently.

"Er... Caitlin?" he asked. "Are you awake?"

Caitlin groaned sleepily. "Severus?" she murmured, turning to face him, sliding an arm around him.

"No!" Lupin yelped, backing away. "Not Severus! Remus!" Caitlin opened her eyes, blinking as she tried to focus. Finally she realised who she was lying next to.

"Oh," she said, sounding rather disappointed. "Not Severus." Yawning and stretching, she hauled herself up on to an elbow. "Oh yeah, I remember. Severus insisted on keeping an eye on you to keep you out of trouble. So I ended up helping him babysit you."

"Very kind of you," said Lupin. "Severus really offered to babysit me?"

"Oh yes. I think he's quite attached to your wolf form. Of course, it doesn't hurt that the wolf's ridiculously cute." She glanced up and down, eyes clearly appreciative. "Mind you, the man's not bad either," she purred.

Lupin felt himself go red. "Stop it," he muttered, hauling the sheets up to chin level. "Honestly, aren't you and Severus meant to be seeing each other?"

"Well yes," Caitlin admitted. "Although not officially, as we don't want anyone to know just yet. Deanna would be embarrassed, and I'm sure Harry would never approve."

"My lips are sealed," Lupin promised with a smile. "Does that mean you're going to stop flirting with me then?"

Caitlin shrugged. "If you like. But if you'd rather not be teased, might I suggest putting some clothes on?"

Lupin suddenly realised that under the sheets, he was in fact naked, as he always was after a Change. And that if Caitlin had helped put him to bed... He found himself blushing again. Caitlin rolled her eyes.

"Honestly, Remus, it's nothing I've not seen before. Stop being such a prude."

"Yes, well, I'm not as used to people seeing me naked as you," Lupin replied primly.

"Remus! Are you saying I'm a tart?"

"No, just used to having night time companionship," Remus returned. "So where did you put my clothes then?"

"On the chair over there. All in one place, neatly folded, easy to find. Aren't we considerate?"

Lupin strongly suspected that Severus had been responsible for that. Caitlin was not noted for her organisational skills at the best of times, while Severus could be slowly driven insane by things placed at odd angles or otherwise out of place.

"Thank you, Caitlin," he replied. He noticed she was still watching him expectantly. "Might I have some privacy while I dress?"

Caitlin sighed. "Oh all right, if you insist." She turned around, pointedly staring away. "Hurry up then, if you're doing it."

Moving as quickly as his muscles let him, Lupin got up and started pulling his robes on. Finally, he was finished.

"All right, I'm decent. You can look now."

Caitlin rolled over, eyeing up his robes. "God, look at you," she scolded. "How long have you had those? Remus, you're earning. You can afford new robes now."

"I like these," said Lupin defensively. It was true, he'd grown used to them by now. Besides, he hated clothes shopping. It always seemed to

involve shop assistants sneering at his wardrobe, when they weren't trying to talk him into buying things he couldn't afford.

Caitlin snorted. "Hmm. Well, at least I now know what to get you for Christmas."

"I'm getting a present, am I?" Lupin raised an eyebrow.

"Maybe," Caitlin grinned. "If you behave yourself."

"I always behave myself," Lupin replied primly. "You're the one with all the rumours floating after her."

"True," Caitlin shrugged. "Some of them even have a basis in fact." Caitlin sat up, sitting cross-legged on the bed, and motioned for Lupin to join her. After a few

moments' consideration he did so. Something in her eyes had changed, and the light flirtation had vanished, to be replaced by an altogether more sombre aspect. She needed to talk to him about something, that much was clear.

"Caitlin?" he asked softly. "Is everything all right?"

She didn't answer him at first. "Tell me, Remus, in the last years of the war, what did Sirius tell you about what he'd been up to? Anything? You were one of his best friends; he must have said something. Where did he tell you he was living, with who and why?"

"Why on earth do you want to know that-?"

"Just answer the question."

"Well, all right," said Lupin with a frown. "He was with James and Lily and Harry; he was their go between with the outside world. That much was fairly common knowledge. The sly old dog had moved in to the old Tyler mansion, consoling Medea Tyler after her - you - disappeared..." The penny finally dropped for Lupin. "But you already know, don't you,"

he said softly. "Because you were there too, you and Deanna. Weren't you?"

Caitlin nodded. "Yeah. Took you long enough to realise though, didn't it?"

Lupin blushed. "I never really thought about it till now, to be honest. At the time we all thought you'd died, and afterwards... well, afterwards all I could think about was how he'd fooled us all." He gazed at Caitlin sadly, suddenly realising that her fears about Sirius's return must cloak some shocking secrets.

"Is he Deanna's father?" he asked gently. He was surprised when Caitlin shook her head.

"No. Just stepfather. I was already pregnant when I escaped. Sirius offered to marry me so I wouldn't have to explain to her where she'd really come from."

Lupin could guess where that had been. Shaking, he stroked Caitlin's hair back. "That utter... I had no idea how deep his treachery really went."

"Yeah," Caitlin whispered. "When I finally made it home, Sirius tried to go after the one person I could identify, until Mum talked him out of it. At the time I thought he was after revenge on my behalf. Now I realise he was just going to take out the traitor who let me go."

Lupin didn't say a word. He was recalling an incident not long after Caitlin's disappearance, when he'd gone to Sirius's flat to drop off a jacket left behind after the previous week's Marauder booze-a-thon. Sirius had been there, already drunk despite the early hour, busily engaged in the process of trashing the place, more livid than Lupin had ever seen him. It had taken nearly half an hour to calm Sirius down enough to get him to talk, and even then, Sirius had not been forthcoming with the details. All Lupin had been able to glean was that it was to do with Caitlin, that Sirius had a

definite idea of who was responsible for what had happened to her, but could do nothing, and was taking it out on his innocent flat.

"Damn him," Lupin seethed. "Caitlin, I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," Caitlin sighed. "You weren't to know. He hid it well. I never suspected - not even James suspected, and they were like brothers." She raised her head, cold anger simmering in her eyes. "And now Deanna knows. Her memories returned, and I had to tell her everything." She proceeded to fill Lupin in on the events of the weekend. Lupin listened in shock as he heard how the Dementors had invaded the pitch during the match, and the effects they had had on both Harry and Deanna.

"Are they all right? And Harry, my god, how far did he fall? Is he injured?"

"He's fine, Dumbledore slowed him down. They're both OK, just shocked, and who can blame them?" Caitlin glanced up, eyes steely. "But that's not why I'm here. Remus, I need your help."

"My help?" Remus wondered why on earth he was needed. However, he did owe Caitlin a favour, and if he could do anything that might help Harry and Deanna, he would. "What do you need me to do?"

"Train my children." Caitlin reached out and grasped his shoulder. "Teach them how to fight Dementors. I know you know how - do you think I'd have suggested you, this year of all years, if I doubted your skills in that area? Remus, please. Teach them how to fight Dementors, how to resist them. Come on, Remus, I know you can do this."

Lupin felt his stomach clench. "Caitlin, I... I'm not sure, I mean, this is very advanced magic we're talking about here, the magical strength alone would be considerable, not to mention the mental and emotional qualities."

Caitlin cut him off. "They've both got the power. Deanna can actually summon a Patronus when there's no pressure on. She just needs to know how to do it in a combat situation. And I think Harry could do it too, given time and tuition."

Which was all very well, and Lupin was inclined to agree with her in theory, but Patronus Charms were advanced magic and Dementors were not easy to stand up to. But Caitlin was looking at him imploringly and with more than a hint of Glamoury, of that he was sure, and he did owe this job to her after all...

"All right," he heard himself sigh. "I'll do what I can. But Caitlin, I can't guarantee that they'll both master the technique and be instantly able to repel Dementors. They're strong, but they're both still children after all. However," he added, seeing the hopeful look on her face, "I'll see what I can do."

Caitlin squealed and flung her arms around him. "Oh, thank you, Remus! I knew I could count on you!"

Lupin returned the hug, wishing he shared her optimism, and wondering what on earth he'd let himself in for now.

Caitlin left not long after that, her purpose achieved, and apparently convinced Lupin was going to be all right. For his part, Lupin, although nervous about just what he'd agreed to, was feeling better. Although the Change was still as physically gruelling as ever, the effects of the Wolfsbane had managed to eliminate the mental drain, with the result that, although he still looked awful, he didn't feel too bad. So it was that by lunchtime he was ready to face the world again, and was back in his classroom, ready to take the afternoon classes. Almost as if the Fates were conspiring against him, he found himself face to face with none other than Harry's class, as Hermione Granger poked her head around the door, smiled at him in relief and turned back, calling out "It's OK!" This heralded the arrival of the Gryffindor third years, who piled in to the classroom and immediately began making their feelings known as to what they'd thought of lessons in his absence. Amidst the shouting and general tumult, he was able to gather that Professor Snape had

taken their lesson, and it hadn't gone well. Despite it being an advanced topic, he'd set them an essay on werewolves.

"Did you tell him we haven't covered them yet?" he said, frowning.

"Yes, but he said we were really behind..." The babble recommenced. With difficulty, Lupin calmed everyone down and promised that they wouldn't have to do the essay, to the relief of everyone except Hermione, who'd already finished it. With that dealt with, he began to lecture them on Hinkypunks, better known as Will o' the Wisps, and the related phenomenon of corpselights. Inside, however, he was seething. What on earth was Severus thinking, setting them an essay on werewolves? It was far too advanced a topic for the third years, and Severus surely knew it. There was only one explanation, and that was that the Potions Master wanted everyone to know how to spot a werewolf... wanted someone to realise that he was one. The thought galled him. This was his best chance for a proper job in his own world, and more to the point, it was a job he was coming to love, and Severus was trying to sabotage it because of a childish grudge. What on earth Caitlin saw in the man, he had no idea, but one thing he did know - he and Severus needed a long overdue talk.

So it was that after lessons were over, Professor Severus Snape found himself startled by his office door slamming open and a furious Remus Lupin storming in.

"Recovered then, I see-" Snape began, but Lupin left him no space to finish the sentence.

"Severus Snape, what in god's name do you think you're playing at?" Lupin bellowed, slamming his fist on Snape's desk.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "I, Lupin? I am not the one bursting in to my colleagues' offices and screaming abuse at them. Were you planning on explaining yourself at any point - oof!" Lupin had grabbed him by the front of his robes and dragged him halfway across the desk, Snape's eyes now inches from his own.

"I think you know exactly what I'm talking about," Lupin snarled. "Setting the third years an essay on werewolves, when you know damn well they're not ready for that subject yet!"

"And whose fault is that, Lupin?" Snape returned. "Perhaps if you'd taught them better, they just might be - ah!" Lupin tightened his grip on Severus.

"I know what you're up to, Severus," Lupin hissed. "I know what you're thinking, make them research werewolves, teach them how to identify one and who knows, maybe one or two of the more intelligent students might start wondering exactly why Professor Lupin's off sick so often, and then happen to check the dates against a lunar almanack! What are you trying to do, Severus, ruin me?"

Snape did glare at him then, the cold aloofness dropping away to reveal the hate beneath. "Educate them, you fool of a werewolf," he snapped back. "You don't think I don't know what your intentions are? What the Beast wants? The desires not even the Wolfsbane can keep in check? Don't think I've not seen the way you and Miss Lovegood look at each other."

Lupin's eyes widened, before, with a growl that had all the Beast's menace behind it, he grabbed Snape's throat and hurled him to the floor.

"You... utter... bastard!" he choked, barely able to contain himself. "That you could even suggest that I'd ever consider such a thing!"

"But you do, don't you, Lupin?" Snape rasped, still refusing to back down. "The Beast wants its prey, doesn't it? Well, it can rage all it wants, but I will tell you this, Lupin - I would die myself before I let you get your filthy paws on Miss Lovegood or any other student at this school!"

Lupin finally snapped. With the Beast's strength behind him, he grabbed one of the chairs in front of Snape's desk and hurled it at the Potions master. Fortunately for Snape, his reflexes kicked in and he rolled to the side, the chair bouncing off the floor where his head had

been. Shaken but determined not to show it, Snape scrambled to his feet.

"Hit a nerve, have I?" Snape snarled. "Rather that the students remain unaware of the signs and off their guard, would you?"

"Shut up!" Lupin snapped, covering his ears. "Just shut up!" Slowly, he felt the Beast subside and the rage die out of him. He opened his eyes, gathering his wits and calming himself down.

"I am not a danger to the students, Severus," said Lupin coldly. "I'm good at my job, I like my job, I've worked hard all my life to get where I am, and I'm not about to let your childishness take it all away from me! In future, I'd kindly appreciate it if you kept confidential information about your colleagues to yourself!" Turning around, he swept out of the office.

Snape watched him go, finally letting out the breath he'd been holding. Righting the chair with a flick of his wand, he opened the desk drawer that he kept his emergency supply of brandy in and poured himself a glass.

"Round one to Slytherin," he murmured to himself.

Lupin's rage had barely subsided as he stormed out into the corridor, with the result that he ended up colliding with a passing Slytherin. A Slytherin who turned out to be one Deanna Tyler.

"Hey! Watch where you're goin- oh. Er, hi sir!" said Deanna, a little sheepishly, as she helped Lupin regain his balance.

"No, no, quite all right, entirely my fault, wasn't looking where I was going," said Lupin, hastily staggering to his feet, brushing down his robes and getting to a safe distance before Snape could emerge from his office and demand to know what he was doing molesting one of his

students. He regarded the girl sadly, recalling what her mother had told him that morning.

"I heard about what happened this weekend," Lupin said gently. "How are you feeling?"

Deanna shrugged. "Well, I was kind of upset at first. But, you know, you get over it. I'm going to steer clear of the Dementors, and Mum's going to..." She stopped, clearly unwilling to reveal more.

"Take care of business?" Lupin prompted with a smile. Deanna nodded, one corner of her mouth twitching upwards.

"Yeah. Something like that." The two of them walked together for a while, until Lupin decided to break the silence. He needed to talk to her anyway, and now was as good a time as any.

"So, Deanna. Your mother had a word with me this morning."

Deanna immediately stiffened. "What's she said to you?" she asked, instantly wary. Lupin felt a pang of sadness that such a young person could be so defensive about their family... but then Deanna had good reason.

"Well, in the light of your reaction to Dementors, she's decided that you need extra tuition in how to deal with them, you and Harry both. I was wondering how you felt about that?"

Deanna opened her mouth in shock. "Extra lessons? Me?"

"That's right," Lupin nodded with a smile. "Your mother thinks you could benefit and so do I." He noticed how wary she was still looking, and guessed that this notoriously proud Slytherin might not take too kindly to the insinuation that her present levels of magic were lacking in any way. He decided to try a little psychology. "I mean, it's rather advanced magic, to be sure, and I wouldn't normally teach this sort of thing to people your age, but I think you're capable of learning it. That is, if you're interested?"

"Oh, I'm interested," Deanna replied, her earlier wariness gone. The prospect of learning arcane and difficult magic that her peers simply weren't capable of managing was one Deanna couldn't have turned down if she'd tried. "When do we start?"

"Well, it's a little too close to Christmas to start anything now," said Lupin, "but I think I can start lessons in January. How does that sound?"

Deanna nodded brusquely, a little disappointed at having to wait. "In January then."

But before January, there was Christmas, and before Christmas, there was shopping to be done, much of it in a rather furtive and secretive manner, with extreme machinations being employed in order to buy presents for one's friends without them being aware of it, complicated by the fact that said friends were also along on the trip and in the name of companionship, were refusing to leave your side.

Some, however, were being rather more secretive than others. One figure in particular, wearing dark red robes, blonde hair tied back and hidden under her hood, had more reason than most not to be noticed. Marlie Lovegood had not one, but two, unusual gifts to buy, and would rather not be observed buying them.

Fortunate then that the upper years, those whose mothers had not banned them from leaving the school grounds anyway, had been given the opportunity to Floo to Diagon Alley to do their Christmas shopping. Most had taken full advantage of this, including all but one of the Slytherin fifth years.

On arrival, Rianne had wasted no time in disappearing with Luella, shooting a parting wink at Marlie, leaving the blonde Slytherin to her own devices. And so it was that Marlie was making her way into Knockturn Alley, glancing at an address Rianne had scribbled down after attempting some scrying for her, and studiously trying to avoid meeting anyone's gaze.

Having been accosted by several less than savoury individuals, all after money in some form or another, she finally found the place she

was looking for. She looked the place over, wondering for the hundredth time that day what she was doing here, standing outside a disreputable little shop that looked like it had been closed for years, by the name of Curunir and Sons New and Used Wands. Marlie wrinkled her nose, feeling vaguely grimy just being there. She seriously doubted very many new wands got sold in this place. Taking a deep breath, she mentally cursed Sirius for getting her into this mess in the first place, and entered.

A little bell tinkled as the door creaked open. Shuddering, Marlie inched her way in, trying not to recoil as a hunched-over old witch hobbled out of the back room.

"Can I help you, dearie?" she cackled, wringing her hands.

"Um, yeah," said Marlie hesitantly. "I, er, need a wand. For a friend."

The old witch grinned knowingly, revealing a mouth with not nearly enough teeth for Marlie's liking.

"For a friend, eh? That's what most of my customers say." She steadied herself behind the counter, eyes glinting in a most unsettling manner. "What sort of wand does this

friend need then? Is it a replacement for a lost wand, or do they need a second wand not traceable to them?"

"Er..." Marlie hadn't really thought this far ahead. She didn't think that even the manager of a dodgy wand shop in Knockturn Alley would take kindly to being told that the wand was for the notorious Sirius Black. Luckily, the sales witch had had this conversation many times before.

"You're not used to this sort of thing, are you, lovey?" she asked, knowingly. She studied Marlie, a glint of recognition flitting across her

face. "Hardly surprising, with your background. It's Miss Lovegood, isn't it? Melissa Lovegood's daughter."

Marlie's widened in horror. She'd hoped not to be recognised. Her fingers automatically crept to her own wand.

"Now, now, don't be hasty," the other witch said, swiftly raising her hands. "Old Esme Curunir doesn't ask questions of her customers. What you're wanting that wand for is none of my business, I'm sure." Her gaze softened. "You're friendly with Caitlin Tyler's kid, aren't you? Young Deanna." She tutted, not giving Marlie a chance to reply. "Nasty business, that was, with that Sirius Black. Betraying her family like that. Rumour has it he's the girl's father, you know."

"Yeah, I know," said Marlie quietly, hoping Mrs. Curunir would get to the point sooner rather than later.

"I thought so," Mrs. Curunir said, as if her suspicions were confirmed. "I've heard she's a hot-tempered little thing, the young Miss Tyler." Marlie nodded. The sales witch smiled.

"I have just the thing. Wait here." She disappeared into the back room and stayed there for a good ten minutes, before returning, a plain black wand-box in her arms.

"Here," she said, opening the box to reveal an unassuming looking oak wand. Marlie looked at it curiously.

"Nice. Where'd it come from?"

The witch cackled with glee. "Where did it come from! Now there's a question; but not the most important one. I bought it off a Ministry wizard who needed the cash in a hurry to pay off his debts. Well, that's nothing new - there's always those so desperate they'll sell even their wand. But this one was special. It wasn't the seller's own wand, no!"

"No? So whose was it then?" Marlie asked.

"It belonged to a recently arrested criminal," Mrs. Curunir told her. "This Ministry wizard was running quite the racket back then. He worked for the DMLE as was, and when someone was arrested and tried, he'd take the wand, exchange it for a counterfeit, and bring it here for me to sell on. Of course, I had no idea at the time, I only found out later, but by then I'd sold most of them anyway. All except this one.

This was the last one he ever brought me, right at the end of the war, when the supply started to dry up. This time, he did tell me where it came from - reckoned it would be worth more if I knew. Said its owner wouldn't be coming back for it in a hurry, although if he knew then what we all know now... but never mind me." She stroked the wand almost lovingly. "It's his, you know. Sirius Black's."

Marlie gasped, one hand flying to her mouth. Sirius's original wand had survived? No wonder Rianne had been so insistent that she come here and nowhere else. That did it. She had to have this wand.

"I thought you'd be interested," Mrs. Curunir noted, satisfied. "I hung on to it all these years, waiting for the right customer to come along. But now I think it's time to sell it. After all, what would be more fitting than for Sirius Black's own daughter to kill him with his own wand? Oh, you don't need to say anything," she said airily. "It's quite obvious. Deanna Tyler could wait for her mother and the Aurors to find him, but she'd rather have the satisfaction of doing it herself and would rather not use her own wand. So she's sent you here to buy her one in secret."

Marlie nodded, relieved that she wouldn't even have to lie.

"I thought as much," Mrs. Curunir nodded, wrapping the wand up again. "Now, normally I'd be charging about 20 Galleons for something like this, but under the circumstances, I think you deserve a bit of a discount. Shall we say ten Galleons?"

"Done," said Marlie, reaching for her purse. She'd withdrawn just enough from Sirius's vault to cover it. Paying up, she could barely stop herself dancing with anticipation as Mrs. Curunir rang up the purchase and put the wand in a plain black bag for her. This had gone far better than she had ever dreamed. All she had to do now was get back to Diagon Alley and order that bloody Firebolt...

Easier said than done. As she walked away from the relative safety of Curunir's, she became aware that someone was watching her. In Knockturn Alley, this was not good. Marlie quickened her pace. Behind her, she heard footsteps, also gaining speed to match hers. Marlie began to quietly panic.

OhgodohgodohgodI'mgoingtodieandHarryandSiriuswillnevergettheirresentsandPadfootwillthinkIabandonedhimohgodSiriushelpme!

Exactly how Sirius was meant to help her from hundreds of miles to the north was anyone's guess, but subconsciously Marlie had come to rely on the protective presence of the big, black Grim-a-like. This time, though, she was on her own. Grabbing her wand, she spun around, preparing to curse her stalker.

The hex died on her lips, however, as she came face to face with someone who could have been her older self. Clad in blue robes, hair falling loose and on display in a way that indicated its wearer was the most dangerous thing in the vicinity and knew it, was Narcissa Malfoy, a wry smile curving its way on to her face.

"Well," said Narcissa, amused. "Of all the people I thought I might encounter down here, I didn't think it'd be young Marlie Lovegood. Does your mother know you're here - no, of course she doesn't. I don't think anyone else does, either, am I right?"

Marlie fingered her wand, wondering how to get out of this one. She could hardly hex a blood relative, could she?

"My friends know I was coming here," she said, hiding her fears. "They're expecting me back soon - they'll know if anything happens to me."

"But not until far too late," said Narcissa. Her face softened. "Marlie, this is no place for you. What on earth are you doing here anyway - no,

don't tell me. I really would rather not know." She noticed Marlie's wand still pointing at her. "It's alright, Marlie," she said gently, although her eyes seemed sad rather than anything. "You can put the wand away, I won't hurt you."

Marlie hesitated, but something in Narcissa's eyes convinced her. The older witch would surely have struck by now if she was going to, right? Slowly, Marlie put her wand away. Narcissa, smiling now, let out the breath she'd been holding.

"Much better," she said. She held out her arm to Marlie. "Now, assuming your business here is finished, why don't I walk you back to Diagon Alley? So far, you've been very lucky, but your luck might not last. However, if you're with me, no one will even look at you, that I can promise."

Marlie hoped her relief wasn't as obvious as it felt. For all her bravado, Knockturn Alley was a scary place, and an escort back to the safer areas was more than welcome.

"OK," she said, linking arms with Narcissa. "Thank you."

"Oh, think nothing of it," said Narcissa dismissively. "It's the least I can do. For the past two summers, you've kept Draco occupied and out of my hair, and that's more than worth this little favour."

Marlie couldn't help but smile at that. "Oh dear. Is he that annoying at home too?"

Narcissa frowned, looking almost pained. "Marlene, my dear, don't misunderstand me - Draco is my son and I love him dearly... but at times he can be very tiresome."

"Tiresome's not even the half of it," Marlie grinned. "Although he's actually not that bad compared to some of the new first years."

"Maybe," said Narcissa, looking faintly disbelieving. "But your new first years are not constantly complaining to me about certain Muggle-borns outperforming them, or certain well-known Gryffindor wizards getting special treatment, or demanding the latest toy from Diagon Alley."

"Yeah, I hear you," Marlie sighed. "I usually either hit him with a cushion, or park him in front of the nearest games console. Or show him something shiny. That distracts him too."

"Shiny things, hmm?" Narcissa mused. "I shall have to bear that in mind. But never mind him, I'm more interested in you. I hear you got back on the Quidditch team recently."

"Yeah," said Marlie happily, quite forgetting her earlier fears about Narcissa. "Thanks to Draco getting himself mauled by a mad Hippogriff."

"Ah yes," said Narcissa smoothly. "That little incident. Tell me, Marlie, what did you hear about the whole affair? I'd be interested in hearing what the Slytherin grapevine has to say."

"Well, to outsiders, we're all claiming that the animal just went nuts and nearly killed him," said Marlie. "But it's generally thought inside Slytherin that Draco pissed it off somehow. Even Goyle thinks Malfoy was being an idiot. I kid you not, Deanna's first question on hearing he'd been injured was 'What did he do to it?' Her second was 'What did he really do to it?' and I think her third was along the lines of 'I didn't think even he was that stupid,' which come to think of it, isn't really a question, but still..." Her voice trailed off, as Marlie began to realise what an idiot she must be sounding like. Still, Narcissa didn't seem bothered.

"And what do you believe?" Narcissa asked.

"Tending towards the 'Draco probably annoyed it' camp, I'm afraid," said Marlie apologetically. "Sorry."

"Oh, don't apologise," Narcissa sighed. "I know my son of old, and I think you're probably right."

"You do?" Marlie asked, surprised. She'd always thought of the Malfoys as rather indulgent parents ready to leap to the defence of their only child. Apparently that wasn't quite as true as she'd thought.

"Yes, unfortunately," said Narcissa wearily. "Sadly, Lucius has taken the opposite view. He always did have a blind spot where Draco was concerned - I keep telling him he spoils that boy, but he won't listen - I'm just the boy's mother after all, what would I know?" She shook herself, returning to the subject in hand. "Lucius has taken the whole thing rather personally, I'm afraid. He's made a formal complaint to the governors, trying to get the beast in question put down."

That got Marlie's attention at once. "He hasn't!"

"I only wish it were so."

"But... but that's not fair, it's Draco's own stupid fault he got hurt!" Marlie protested. She'd always had a soft spot for animals, and among one of her many childhood toys had been a stuffed cuddly Hippogriff. "You have to talk him out of it, it's not fair that an innocent animal should die just because Draco's incapable of listening to anyone."

"You think I have not tried?" Narcissa hissed, rounding on the girl. "Believe me, when it comes to ignoring any point of view but his own, Draco's very much his

father's son, let me tell you." She ran her hands through her hair. "There's only one thing gone right, and that's that Molly Weasley's a governor now. At the hearing last week, she successfully argued for an adjournment until January on the grounds of not enough evidence the beast was at fault. The others agreed, probably just to shut her up, but nevertheless, we've got a reprieve. I'm just not sure now what to do with it."

"Can't you get Draco to just 'fess up?" Marlie suggested. Narcissa just rolled her eyes.

"Yes, and then we can all bask in the warm north wind caused by Nifflheim thawing out. Honestly, Marlie, do you really think Draco will publicly admit he's in the wrong?"

A few months ago, Marlie would have agreed with Narcissa. However, just recently, Draco's character had been getting just a little bit more, well, benevolent. More altruistic, less self-serving. Less likely to see an innocent being die, perhaps. It had to be worth a try.

"I don't know," said Marlie thoughtfully. "But it's possible. I think he could be guilt-tripped into it. Especially if someone asked him rather probing questions."

Narcissa caught on immediately. "You want him before the governors in person, don't you," she purred.

Marlie nodded with a grin. "Yeah. And if someone on the board, someone with a grudge against the Malfoys, years of experience with misbehaving boys, and a Slytherin daughter to act as informant, a Slytherin daughter who just happens to be a friend of mine, happened to be fully aware that Draco had most likely been taunting it, well, anything could happen."

"It could," Narcissa began to smile. "Well, this conversation has been most enlightening. I shall have to talk to Lucius tonight. He did want to keep Draco out of it, I think he believed Draco had been through enough, but the boy's well enough now. Who knows, the sight of poor little Draco recounting his tale of woe might tug on a few heart strings." But not those of Molly Weasley, who's spent far too much time raising boys to be easily won over by such tricks, was the unspoken corollary. Marlie picked up on it at once, and returned Narcissa's conspiratorial grin. An understanding reached, the two women went on their way, Narcissa swiftly turning the conversation on to the recent match, and Slytherin's renewed prospects for the cup, and thus engaged, the two made their way back towards Diagon Alley.

Someone who was not having such a good afternoon was one Deanna Tyler. As the lone Prefect not going to Diagon Alley, she'd been left babysitting the rest of the House all afternoon. The Rite of the Turning of the Blind Eye (involving an actual preserved Eye kept in a glass cabinet, which the most senior Slytherin present could turn in order to

allow natural justice to take its course) had been performed no less than three times, and the third time, Deanna had turned the Eye and left it like that all afternoon, announcing that anyone wilfully pissing off any Slytherin in a more senior year and persisting after threats were issued deserved anything that happened to them. Everything had calmed down after that, and once the more raucous of the first years

had been 'pacified', the others mysteriously and suddenly lost interest in anything other than sitting quietly and doing their homework.

Even so, by the time the others returned, Deanna had had quite enough of both the common room and the younger Slytherins for one day, and wasted little time in taking herself off to the library for some well-deserved peace.

However, if it was peace she was after, she was to be disappointed. As she was cutting along the third floor corridor, just after the statue of the one-eyed witch, she was distracted by a noise behind her. Spinning around, wand in hand, she found herself face to face with Harry, who'd appeared from nowhere, it seemed, and was pocketing a piece of parchment.

Deanna lowered her wand. "Harry? Everything all right?" He looked upset about something, although Deanna couldn't think what.

"Did you know?" Harry asked, voice thick with emotion.

"Know what?" Deanna asked. However, there weren't many topics likely to incite Harry to that level of anger.

"About Black!" Harry yelled. "Did you know what he did to my parents? To us?"

"Harry-" Deanna began, silently cursing her mother's insistence that Harry didn't need to know about Sirius Black.

"Did you know he sold us all out to Voldemort?" Harry roared at her.

Deanna lowered her eyes. No use denying it.

"Yes," she finally admitted. "Mum told me after Halloween. She said not to say anything to you - you were better off not knowing."

"Better off?" Harry screamed. "Deanna, the bastard KILLED MY PARENTS!"

"Harry..." Deanna tried to calm him down, hoping no one was in hearing distance.

"Don't 'Harry' me!" Harry fumed. "Thanks to him, I lost my home and entire family! He was meant to be their best friend, and he went straight to Voldemort and told him how to find them!" He stared disbelievingly at Deanna. "And you - you lost everything too! It was your ancestral home that got destroyed, your gran that got killed, they're even saying he was your father! How can you just stand there, knowing, and just take it? Why aren't you hunting him down? Don't you care? Don't you give a toss at all?"

He found his air supply cut off as Deanna's legendary temper snapped, and she grabbed him by the robes.

"Of course I give a toss," she snarled. "Of course it bothers me! He turned his back on his wife and as-good-as child, you think I'm not just a little upset by that? Harry, the

Dementors at Halloween, they suppressed all my good memories and brought the worst flooding back. Even when I recovered, the bad memories didn't go away, and with them came a few other things I'd forgotten. You think it's bad knowing? Try fucking remembering!" She shoved Harry against the wall before letting him go, her anger fading. "I remember, Harry. I remember everything. Remember believing he cared about us... about me. Harry, I used to call him Daddy." She broke off, not trusting the tears not to come. She closed her eyes,

taking a few deep breaths as she waited for the urge to go away. Finally, she opened them again, to see Harry looking far more contrite.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I didn't realise. I'm... sorry."

"So you should be," said Deanna, a tad harshly. She softened as he flinched back, hurt. "Oh god, Harry, can we not argue over this? We were both hurt by him. If we're arguing over it, it's giving him what he wants. He'll have won."

"Yeah," said Harry, still sounding shaky. "Yeah, you're right." He held out his hand. "I'm sorry I was such a prat."

Deanna took it with a smile. "And I'm sorry I shouted at you. Friends again?"

"Friends." They shook on it. Harry looked at her quizzically. "So what are you going to do then? Because I refuse to believe you're not planning something. You're not going to tell me you weren't thinking of revenge."

"Briefly," Deanna replied. "But you're forgetting something."

"What?"

"My mum's an Auror. And she's the head of the family." Deanna smiled coldly, recalling her mother's face as she'd promised revenge for her daughter. "She remembers more than me, Harry. She wants revenge too. And she'll take it. Don't worry, Harry. He'll get what's coming to him."

"And if he doesn't?" Harry inquired.

"I promised Mum I wouldn't go looking," said Deanna. "However, if he finds me, or if we happen to run into him..." She let Harry finish the sentence on his own. He began to smile, a smile as cruel as her own.

"Brilliant," he said softly. He fingered the pocket he'd hidden the parchment in. "In that case, I think I can wait. But if he comes anywhere near me, he's officially dead."

Chapter Twenty Three Death Makes An Auror

Night fell, daybreak came, and the term was finally over. As was usual, the common rooms were hectic and the dormitories were even worse. Especially in Slytherin, where it seemed the entire house was going home. All, that is, except one.

"I still can't believe you're staying here over the holidays," Deanna sighed as she finished her packing.

Marlie shrugged. "Why not? Lots of other people do it."

"Not this year, there aren't!" Deanna snapped as she slammed the lid of her trunk down. "Marlie, let me once again reiterate who else is staying behind this year. From Gryffindor, Harry, Ron and Hermione, and believe me, they're only staying because the Ministry won't let Harry go to Mum's in case Sirius Black attacks again. From Ravenclaw, one first year whose father is a Muggle diplomat currently living abroad. From Hufflepuff, one first year whose parents are rumoured to be on the brink of divorce, and who doesn't have much of a home to go back to. And from Slytherin, there's you. That's it, Marlie. Six people out of the entire school! All of whom are at least two years younger than you, and they're all in different Houses! Marls, you are going to be all on your own! For two whole weeks. Are you sure you're going to manage?"

"I'll be fine!" Marlie snapped, irritated not least by the fact that Deanna had a very good point. Damn you, Padfoot, you had better be bloody grateful after all this. "I can always talk to Professor Lupin if I get lonely."

Deanna's concern immediately vanished, to be replaced by a knowing grin. "Oh right. Talk to Professor Lupin, eh?"

Marlie went pink. Sirius Black had better be bloody ecstatic after this.

"It's not like that!" she protested. It was to no avail. Deanna turned to Luella, who was busy stuffing the last of her possessions into her trunk, and fighting with the lid.

"Marlie reckons Professor Lupin's going to keep her company over the Christmas break," Deanna informed her with a grin.

"Is he now," Luella smirked. "Does he know this yet, or is Marlie planning to surprise him with a candlelit dinner and a trail of rose petals leading to the dorm?"

"Lu!" Marlie shrieked, appalled. Deanna appeared to share her feelings, albeit for different reasons.

"Please god, no. Not here," she said, looking quite ill. "Marlie, if you must seduce Professor Lupin, can you do it in his office or something? It's just I don't think I could ever sleep in here again knowing you'd been shagging teachers in here."

"Who's been shagging teachers in here?" Rianne asked curiously, having just entered from the bathroom, gathering various towels and bottles.

"Marlie's going to seduce Professor Lupin while we're all on break," Luella told her, eyes glinting mischievously.

Rianne smiled knowingly at Marlie. "You and your older men, Lovegood," Rianne tutted. "Honestly, what will we do with you?"

Marlie squirmed, avoiding Rianne's gaze and muttering. Please, gods above, don't let her start with the whole seducing Sirius thing again. That's all I need.

Rianne didn't seem to notice, and for a few brief, heavenly moments, Marlie thought she'd escaped, as Rianne casually announced to Luella and Deanna that she'd just had to stop some of the fourth years from down the corridor sneaking in and pinching some of their stuff out of the bathroom, and that if the two of them did not want their expensive Italian shampoo and conditioner (Luella's) and their super-soft fluffy towels and Indian sandalwood soap (Deanna's) going the way of Shergar, they might want to clear the bathroom out.

The two girls were not slow in responding, and were soon gone, leaving Marlie alone with Rianne. Marlie began to wonder if her relief might not have been a little premature. She turned out to be right.

"Well," said Rianne smugly. "Staying over for some alone time with Professor Lupin, are you?"

"No," said Marlie, folding her arms, determined not to let Rianne get to her.

"No," Rianne nodded. "Of course not. We all know it's Mr. Padfoot you really want, don't we?"

"Rianne!" Marlie hissed, feeling herself going scarlet, and wondering, not for the first time either, why on earth Rianne was so obsessed with her fancying Sirius (not that she did fancy him, obviously). "For the hundredth time, we're just friends. I don't fancy him, and he prefers older women anyway."

"Is that what he told you?" Rianne smirked.

"Yes, as it happens, he reckons he was constantly having affairs with older witches when he was younger." Marlie glared at Rianne. "Not that any of this is your business anyway."

"No, of course not," Rianne grinned. "I won't pry. But before we all go, I just wanted to give you a couple of things. First, I've put together a little something for Sirius. It's a little bedtime reading, and a little something for him to enjoy afterwards. Here you are." She reached into her bedside cabinet and handed Marlie a parcel. Marlie took it gingerly.

"Am I going to approve of this?" she asked, wary of what Rianne might consider suitable bedtime reading.

"Probably not."

"No, thought not," Marlie sighed. "Will Sirius like it?"

"Almost certainly - no, scratch that. He'll abso-bloody-lutely love it."

"Oh god. What have you bought him - no, don't tell me. I'd rather not know." Marlie tucked it under her bed, out of sight. Whatever it was, if it was something Sirius would love, but likely to annoy or offend her, she truly did not want to know. "So. What was the other thing you had for me?"

"This." Rianne had her wand out before Marlie could even blink. "Fallopiae Impedimenta Sine Matrimonium!"

Marlie clutched her abdomen as the hex hit her full on, crying out in pain as twin stabbing sensations flooded her midriff, one on each side of her body. Fortunately, it was gone almost as soon as it had come, leaving Marlie breathless and aching inside, but otherwise fine.

"What did you just do to me?" Marlie whispered, staring down at her waist. All looked normal enough... but what had it done to her insides?

"Sterilised you," came the prompt, if unexpected reply. Marlie's head jerked up, not quite believing she was hearing this.

"WHAT? Sterili- RIANNE!" Marlie screamed. "I was hoping for a kid or two at some point! You utter..."

"Calm down," said Rianne gently. "It isn't permanent. If you want to have kids, then all you have to do is undergo a magical wedding ceremony. The magical invocations involved will unlock the charm and you'll be fertile again. Until then, you can shag and shag to your heart's content, safe in the knowledge that not one of the little buggers'll hit the target. How's that for a Christmas present?"

"Are you... serious?" Marlie asked weakly. Rianne just grinned slyly.

"No, he's in the Shack awaiting your attention as soon as the rest of us bugger off- wait." Rianne frowned, concentrating. "Actually, no, I think he's outside. Think he might want to see the coaches leave. But he'll be back in the Shack after that, I expect."

"Rianne. That pun's not been funny since 1967. Sirius calculated the date himself." Marlie raised an eyebrow, her emotions beginning to stabilise again. "So, you mean it? I really can't get pregnant? Not unless I get married?"

"Not unless you get married, I promise," said Rianne gently. "And given that you now can't conceive, I very much doubt there's any chance of that happening for a good few years, right Marls?"

"Look, I can't even get a boyfriend at the moment, never mind a husband," Marlie sighed. "Trust me, you got no worries." Suddenly breaking out into a grin, she reached out and hugged her friend. "Thanks. I appreciate it." And then she promptly let her go, frowning suspiciously.

"Why, though? What's up? Have you seen something?" She noticed the troubled look on Rianne's face. "Oh god, have you seen something?" Marlie began to quietly panic.

"Not exactly," said Rianne, deliberately emphasising her words. "That is, I can see a lot of possible futures at the moment. It's really down to you what happens, if anything. If you want to have sex, believe me, the opportunities will come. Maybe you'll want to take them up, maybe you won't. But I just thought that, whatever you decide, you should at least not have that to worry about. You've got enough things to worry about as it is, getting pregnant shouldn't be one of them."

Marlie nodded, not feeling any better at hearing this. However, the opportunity to shag was not something to be sneezed at - she just wondered who it would be. And, entirely unbidden, the image of a pair of brilliant amber eyes floated into her mind...

Finally, everything was packed, and the coaches containing the students were ready to depart. Marlie had accompanied her friends as far as the front door to say goodbye.

"Now are you sure you don't want to come?" Luella asked as she hugged Marlie. "Because it's not too late, you know."

"Excuse me, but I think you'll find it is," Rianne interrupted. "All her stuff's back in the dorm, scattered all over the place as per bloody usual, and you know what this one's like when it comes to packing. In fact, I expect that's why she's staying, she just can't face cramming all her crap into that trunk."

"That's not true," Marlie sulked as Luella laughed. "I just fancied a bit of me time, that's all."

"Yeah, yeah," Rianne grinned. "That's what they all say." She embraced Marlie. "Enjoy having the place to yourself any way. I expect you to take full advantage." She backed off with a knowing wink, leaving just Deanna to bid farewell to. Deanna, however, appeared to be more concerned with the carriages.

"Deanna, gonna say goodbye to the Lovegood?" Rianne asked, casually grabbing her elbow.

"Yeah, in a sec," said Deanna, distracted. "Ri, what's up with the carriages? Why've we got black winged horses pulling them? They don't usually need pulling, do they?"

Luella and Marlie both exchanged quizzical looks. There was nothing there.

"Horses?" Marlie asked, confused.

"Deanna, there's nothing there," said Luella softly. "They're no different."

Deanna shook her head. "No, they're right there, I can see them!" She turned to the others. "Why can't you?"

Luella and Marlie just looked away, shuffling awkwardly, both beginning to wonder if perhaps the strain of the last few months was getting to her but neither quite feeling brave enough to say anything. Rianne for her part squinted at where the 'horses' would be - if they existed outside Deanna's twisted imagination, that is.

"See anything?" Luella asked hopefully.

"Maybe," Rianne frowned. "There's something there. But it's shrouded in something, like a dark barrier. Hang on, I'll see if I can penetrate it - aie!" She leapt back as if in pain, shaking.

"What is it?" Luella asked, going to her. "What did you see?"

"Nothing," Rianne whispered. "I had a look, but no way, no way am I going through that."

"Why?" asked Marlie, typically more curious about what might be hiding than the trauma required to see it. "What's there?"

"I don't know," Rianne gasped. "But I'm telling you this - that black cloak they're hiding under; I could get through it if I tried. But in order to do it... oh gods, in order to do it... I'd have to go somewhere, mentally. Somewhere I really don't want to go."

"But there is something there, right?" said Deanna, oddly relieved to be proved right. "I'm not hallucinating or anything?"

"No, you're not hallucinating," said Rianne. She turned to look at Deanna then, pity in her eyes. "God, you poor thing. To get past that protection..." She shuddered. "I don't envy you."

Deanna turned back to look at the horses, shivering at the sight of them... and slightly puzzled at what it meant to be able to see them. They actually looked rather cute. Yet Rianne claimed they were hidden beneath a potent barrier that required travelling to a dark and frightening mental place to get past. Deanna had to scratch her head at that
one.

For all that her life hadn't exactly been easy, she couldn't remember visiting a dark and frightening mental place, well, not unless being near that Dementor on the train counted...

"Deanna?" She came back to reality with a start, turning to see who had just appeared. Behind her, Professor Lupin was watching her, sadness in his eyes.

"Your friends tell me you can see the Thestrals," he said kindly.

Deanna turned to look at the horses again. "Is that what they are?" she asked, the name ringing a bell. "You mean they're real?"

"Oh yes," Lupin nodded. "It's just that most people can't see them, and they're reckoned to be the lucky ones."

"So Rianne said," Deanna replied softly. "She said that in order to get through their barriers, she'd need to go somewhere dark, somewhere she didn't want to go." She looked up at Lupin, knowing that he held the answers somehow. Then she saw where his eyes were looking, and realised that she wasn't the only one who could see them.

"You see them too," she whispered. Lupin nodded once.

"They're said to be the steeds of Death, the Grim Reaper's own mounts," he said distantly.

"But that's just a fairytale, right?" asked Marlie, who'd wandered up to listen in, and was now standing unwarrantedly close to Professor Lupin. "I mean, there isn't really a skeleton in black with a scythe, who rides a horse only the dead can see, is there?"

"Only the dead can say," Lupin replied cryptically, "and they're not talking. But there are creatures known as Thestrals, black horses with wings, and they're invisible to everyone... unless you've seen someone die."

All eyes turned to Deanna.

"But no one's died since term began, and Deanna couldn't see them then," Luella pointed out.

"Yeah, well, there's no other way to see them," Rianne snapped. "The barrier would have parted for me, but first I would have had to look into the future... and see someone I knew die." She looked away, fear in her eyes. "I never thought I was shockable, but there's some places even I won't go." She turned away, resting her head on Luella's shoulder.

"Still doesn't tell us who Deanna saw die," said Marlie, clearly wondering just what exactly Deanna got up to on her Prefect rounds and if any of the first years had gone missing lately.

"I don't think Deanna saw anyone die this term," said Lupin softly. "But you've seen death, haven't you?"

Deanna nodded slowly. "Yeah. Yeah, I've seen death."

"Deanna, wake up. Wake up!"

Slowly, Deanna opened her eyes, blinking in the firelight. Her mother was kneeling by the bed, shaking her shoulder urgently. It was still night outside. That wasn't right, surely?

"Mummy?" She rubbed her eyes. "What's happening?"

"I don't have time to explain," Caitlin snapped, and Deanna flinched, afraid that her mother was ill again and had turned back into the distant stranger Deanna remembered from much earlier. "Just get your dressing gown and slippers on. And hurry!"

Deanna did as she was told, her fingers trembling as she fumbled at the garment's buttons. Tutting in irritation, Caitlin fastened it herself, before scooping Deanna up in one arm, and clutching her wand in the other.

"Where are we going?" Deanna whispered as Caitlin strode out into the corridor, where Lily was waiting, a sleeping Harry in her arms.

"Away. Out of here."

"Where's away?"

"I don't know!" Caitlin snapped. Deanna shrank back, tears beginning to well up. Next to her mother, Lily reached out to take the frightened girl's arm.

"Ssh, Deanna, cariad," Lily soothed her. "We're going on a little outing, just the four of us. We're playing hide and seek. But you must be very, very quiet, and not make a sound, just in case they catch us. We mustn't let them catch us. Do you understand?"

Deanna didn't, but nodded anyway. Smile fading, Lily turned back to Caitlin.

"Now where?"

"There's a passage near here that'll take us out on to the grounds, near the woods," said Caitlin, her hands holding Deanna just a little bit too

tightly, but Deanna didn't dare say anything, not when Mummy was all strange like this, and not when Auntie Lily had told her not to make a noise. "From there, we make our way under cover of the trees to the monolith on the hill. That marks the edge of the Apparition wards - from there, we Apparate to Mel's with the kids and raise the alarm."

"Apparating with the kids?" Lily gasped. "Cait, that's dangerous, isn't it?"

"What, are you suggesting we leave them behind?" Caitlin snarled as she turned on her friend. Lily shrank back.

"No, of course not," she whispered. "Just that maybe one of us could stay with them while the other went for help..."

"Don't be silly, I couldn't defend two young children on my own if they found us," Caitlin snapped.

Lily's eyes widened as she realised what Caitlin was getting at.

"Cait, no, I'd have stayed..." She was cut off by the sound of an explosion, and the distant sound of a man's voice shouting hexes.

"James," Lily whispered in horror, making for the stairs until Caitlin stopped her.

"Lil, leave it, they're at the door already, we have to get out of here!" Caitlin urged her. Sliding her wand arm around Lily's, she pulled her friend away from the sound of battle downstairs. Tears rolling down her cheeks, Lily nodded once and followed after her. And in Caitlin's arms, Deanna shut her eyes and prayed that this was all just a bad dream.

She didn't remember much of what happened next, face buried in her mother's robes as it was. All she recalled was running, just running, first to a portrait of Scylla Tyler, then down a secret set of spiral stairs which led into a tunnel that passed under the moat that seemed to go on forever. And then finally, out into fresh air again, in a little grotto half hidden under the trees, illuminated by the light from the manor house's

windows. Light that seemed different somehow, not a warm glow, but multicoloured, and alternately flaring then dying. Deanna risked looking up.

The lights had gone out all over Castell y Tal-y-Rhys, lit now only by the light of hexes and curses, and a fire on the ground floor where candles had been knocked over. It would have been pretty - if it hadn't been their home.

Most of the light seemed to be coming from a window on the first floor, where explosions were ringing out and figures running around. Two in particular seemed to be accounting for most of the activity, one tall and thin, head hairless and not quite human, the other shorter, longhaired and evidently female.

"Nana?" Deanna whispered, wondering for the first time why the rest of the family hadn't come with them.

"She's buying us time," Caitlin said, her voice shaking. "She- we- we're not going to be able to get help in time, it's too late!" Her voice cracked as she said this.

"Then let's not waste it," Lily said, voice steady despite the tears on her cheeks, as she took Caitlin's elbow. "Let's go."

Caitlin nodded, unable to speak, turning to follow Lily away. Then it happened. A masculine cry of rage and pain, a woman's laughter, and then suddenly the voices switched around as the woman's laugh turned to a cry of pain which abruptly stopped, and the man - if he could be called a man any more - began to ever so softly laugh. Above her, Deanna felt her mother's grip tighten, as the sapphire ring on her right hand began to glow.

Caitlin stared at it in horror, tears slowly beginning to fall as she guessed what had happened.

"Mum," she choked, closing her eyes. Far across the water, someone shouted "MORSMORDRE!" and the emblem of death rose into the sky. Deanna couldn't take her eyes off it. She knew what it meant, of course, Nana had told her all about the war and the evil dark wizard Tom Riddle, who called himself Voldemort now. They came to people's houses and did terrible things, and when they'd finished, they shot the Dark Mark into the sky. But Nana had always said that they were safe, hadn't she? That not even he could get past the Tal-y-Rhys wards.

"You utter bastards," Caitlin whispered, her voice coming out broken and all wrong, heedless that her daughter could hear every word. Fury twisting her features, she grasped the newly glowing ring and twisted the stone.

As if in answer, the very house itself began to glow, light shining out of every window, running up the walls as they cracked and began to crumble.

"Caitlin?" Lily asked. Caitlin continued to watch the sight, seemingly transfixed.

"If she's dead, so are they," Caitlin breathed. "I'll make sure none of them get out alive!"

Sure enough, the light was gathering at the very top of the house, rising up in a twisted column that lit up the night for miles around.

"Mummy, what's happening?" Deanna begged, fear tying knots in her stomach. "Where's Daddy and Nana and Uncle James?"

"Uncle James and Nana are gone, cariad," Caitlin replied, tenderness creeping in for the first time that night. "You see the people over there - they're bad people, they're Death Eaters, you remember we told you about them?"

Deanna nodded, unable to make a sound. Death Eaters were worse than fairytale monsters, far worse, everyone knew that. Because Death Eaters were real, and they looked completely normal, right up until the moment the got their wands out and killed

you. Death Eaters were Bad, the worst monsters of them all. And they'd got Nana and Uncle James.

"Daddy, why isn't Daddy here?" Deanna whispered, the lump in her throat tightening. Daddy was an Auror, Daddy could fight Death Eaters, why wasn't he here?

"He's at work," Caitlin said, but her eyes told another story. "He - I'm sure help will come."

"That's if he's not with them," Lily said bitterly.

"Don't say that!" Caitlin cried out. She took a few deep breaths, trying to get her emotions under control. "Sirius wouldn't. He just wouldn't."

"Someone had to have let them in, Cait," Lily responded, her voice made hard and ragged by grief, grief for a friend, and grief for the husband she knew she'd never see again.

"Not Sirius," Caitlin repeated, defending him to the last. "Not my Sirius."

The tower of light intensified, before suddenly collapsing, crashing into the devastated house, causing it to fall in on itself. Screams of Death Eaters who hadn't made it out in time rent the air. Somehow, Caitlin managed to smile at the chaos.

"Bet he wasn't expecting that," she muttered, cradling her daughter. Deanna could only bury her head in her mother's hair, weeping softly. Behind her, Harry, woken by the noise of the implosion, and feeling the cold, began to cry.

There is something about an infant's cry, something that can cut across other noise, pierce the air and inexorably attract the attention of any adults within earshot. It didn't fail to do so here. As Caitlin and Lily looked on in horror, Lily desperately trying to hush her son, some of the figures gathered outside turned in their direction. And rising up in their midst was one figure taller than the rest, the eerie green light of the Dark Mark reflecting off his smooth head. Raising his wand, he indicated in their direction.

"They've seen us," Lily whispered, going pale. Caitlin, grief draining away, sprang into action.

"Run," she snapped, shoving Lily before her. Nodding uncertainly, Lily turned and staggered into the trees, Caitlin close behind her.

What followed would forever be a blur, lost in a morass of fear, panic, shouts, darkness, hexes chasing them through the air, and the awful sounds of pursuit. True, Caitlin and Lily had the advantage of cover, a head start and intimate knowledge of the territory - but on the other hand, with no clear path marked out, it was hard going for both witches.

"Oh god," Lily wept as a hex narrowly missed her. "God help us!"

"Just keep going," Caitlin gasped. Turning around, she let off a few hexes of her own. It delayed pursuit for a while... but only for a while.

"They're gaining on us!" Lily cried. "Cait, we're not going to make it!"

Deanna saw her mother glance nervously over her shoulder, instinctively avoiding a vicious-looking blue curse. They were nearly at the end of the wood now, but there were Death Eaters very close behind, and a dark presence that could only be Lord Voldemort himself. Caitlin looked down at her daughter, and finally Deanna saw the mother she knew again.

"You be a good girl for your auntie now," Caitlin whispered tenderly. "Remember, Mummy loves you very much, even if she didn't always show it." She turned back to Lily, grabbing her by the arm and bringing her to halt.

"Cait, what are you doing?" Lily screamed. "You're going to get us killed!"

"No," said Caitlin steadily. "You're going to make it. Here, take Deanna." She lowered her daughter to the ground and placed her hand in Lily's, giving the little girl one last kiss goodbye, before shoving Lily away. "Take them both and go! I'll join you if I can."

"Cait, no," Lily gasped, realising what her friend was planning. "Come with us! Or let me stay with you at least."

"Lil, there is no time!" Caitlin snarled. "Get the kids to safety and get help! I'm trained for this, I can handle it. You aren't. GO!" She lashed the last word with a heavy glamour. Completely unprepared for it, Lily couldn't help but stumble away, dragging a desperate Deanna behind her.

"Mummy? Mummy!" Deanna shrieked. How could she be running back? There were Death Eaters there, she should be running away!

Lily dragged her onwards, heedless of Deanna's cries.

"Come on, we have to go," she said through gritted teeth.

"Mummy!" Deanna sobbed, still trying to get free and run back to her mother, who even now could be heard screaming out some bone-chillingly lethal hexes that almost certainly were not licensed for use by Aurors, or indeed, anyone. Lily, closing her ears to the bloodbath in progress behind her, and to Deanna's sobs, yanked the girl along after her, as they finally broke cover and raced up the hill to the single standing stone that represented the edge of the wards and safety.

Or at least, it would have done if Voldemort had not had the foresight to divide his forces and send some of them around the woods.

From behind the stone emerged three cloaked and masked figures, two men, and in the centre, a dark haired woman who practically glided towards them. Deanna screamed as Lily, heart sinking, pushed the girl behind her.

"No," she whispered, feeling her reserves about to give out.

"Oh yes," the woman chuckled. "Mudblood, your luck just ran out. Well, if you could call it that, given that you're already a widow."

Lily bit back a sob. The other witch laughed at her reaction.

"Yes, darling, I'm afraid your beloved Jamesy-kins has gone on before you. Such a shame, really, he was such fun to play with. His ribs made such a delicious popping sound as they burst his chest open."

Lily pressed Deanna's head to her legs, hand covering her ears. "You bitch," she whispered, as the two men circled behind her.

"What do you want us to do with her, Bella?" one of them growled.

"Yeah, shall we play with her for a bit, or save her for our Lord?" the other smirked. Lily flinched away from him as he breathed down her neck.

"Now, now, boys," Bellatrix Lestrange, for indeed it was she, purred. "There are children present. Wait until later. Then you can find out how to make the Mudblood scream, if you like."

The two wizards both snickered at this, the shorter of the two appearing particularly pleased at this prospect. In the distance, the air was suddenly split by a woman's scream. Deanna sobbed into Lily's robes. They'd got her mother.

"Ah," Bellatrix looked up, pleased. "It would seem our Lord is ready for us."

Sure enough, Lord Voldemort himself strode out of the woods, a few followers at his side... and the bloodied, semi-conscious form of Caitlin Tyler magically hovering beside him.

"On your knees, Mudblood," Bellatrix snapped. "The Dark Lord is here."

Lily ignored her. Bellatrix's ire flared.

"I said, on your knees!" she seethed, firing a Bone-breaker Hex at Lily's kneecaps. Screaming in pain, Lily fell to the floor. However, despite the pain, she still had the

presence of mind to gather the children to her. Looking up, she found herself face to face with the reptilian eyes of Voldemort himself.

"So you found the Mudblood and her whelp," he noted, lipless mouth curling into a smile. "Well done, Bella."

Bellatrix bowed. "Thank you, my Lord. It was a pleasure."

"I am sure it was," he murmured. "Meantime, I found this in the forest." He cancelled the Mobilicorpus and let Caitlin fall to the ground. "She killed half of those with me before the rest even had their wands out. She fights well for a dead woman, does she not, my followers?"

A murmur of assent. Deanna peeped out of Lily's arms, tears flowing freely as she saw her mother lying there unmoving, blood trickling out of her nose. They'd hurt her pretty badly, it seemed, although they hadn't killed her. Not that that was a good thing - she'd heard Nana and Daddy refer to the ones who died quickly as the lucky ones.

"Snape has lied to us then," one of the men observed.

"Indeed, which is why I caused that diversion at dear Lucius's house," Voldemort said calmly, indicating one Death Eater with long blonde hair, who was standing still, staring into space, his mask crooked. So far, he hadn't said anything, or even given any sign that he knew the others were there. "That should keep Severus occupied until morning. When he's finished there, we can reunite him with his lady friend here," he nudged Caitlin's head with his foot. "I would be interested indeed to know why a witch he certified as dead is alive and well enough to kill four Death Eaters without blinking." He glanced up and Deanna looked away, trying to hide as his eyes fell on her. "Although perhaps we have our answer right here," he sneered. "It would appear that House Tal-y-Rhys is not to die with the lady Caitlin after all. Interesting, very interesting. I think I shall give her to Lucius. I do owe him a daughter, do I not?"

Nervous laughter all round. Lily glared at Voldemort, unable to believe she could have hated him any more... but apparently it was possible after all.

"You bastard," she breathed.

Voldemort's eyes fell on her. "And now we come to you. The Evans Mudblood."

Lily bridled but said nothing. Her fear had disappeared by this time, replaced by raw hatred.

"Well, Mudblood," Voldemort continued, "you'll be pleased to know that I have no particular plans for you. It is your son that interests me. Alas, your husband pulled his wand on my followers, so regrettably we had to kill him - my apologies and condolences, by the way. And as for House Tal-y-Rhys, well, they have been a thorn in my side for

years now. But you? No, you matter little to me. So with that in mind, I'm prepared to make you an offer."

Lily pointedly told him what he could do with that offer, using words that Daddy had always told Deanna must under no circumstances be repeated in front of either Mummy, Nana or Auntie Lily.

"Keep a civil tongue in your head when you're speaking to my Master, Mudblood," Bellatrix snapped as she yanked Lily's hair back. "Or I shall rip it out."

"Such spirit," Voldemort chuckled. "I rather like you, little witch. As I like you so much, here's my offer: give me the children, and I shall let you go free. What do you say?"

Lily raised her eyes to his. Something in them must have surprised even him, for he took a step backwards.

"I hear your offer, Riddle," Lily said coldly, ignoring the collective gasp from the gathered Death Eaters, "and here's my response. You can do what you want to me, but know this: I would rather die than let any harm come to these children!"

Voldemort looked at her for a few moments, blinking. He wasn't used to being stood up to - by the time he usually arrived on the scene, his Death Eaters had usually got past that stage and moved things on to the pleading for mercy part of proceedings. He shrugged, raising his wand.

"Have it your way, then. Avada Kedavra!" The green light hit, and Lily fell to the floor with a cry. Deanna stared as the last friendly adult

around died before her eyes, her child's mind falling apart as she realised she was alone in the world, truly alone now. Nana and Uncle James were gone, Mummy was too badly hurt to do anything, Daddy had abandoned them, and now Auntie Lily was dead too. Still, she didn't cry. She mustn't cry, she'd promised not to make a sound. And so, denied an outlet, grief and terror closed in around her mind as she withdrew inside, shutting down, running away to a place inside where Mummy and Daddy were still there, and where the Death Eaters could never find her. And that was how she stayed, even as Voldemort moved to cast the same curse on a crying Harry, even as it hit him and bounced back, annihilating its maker and leaving a scar on the boy's forehead that would forever mark him out as the Boy Who Lived when so many others didn't. Three months later, she'd finally return to the world with no memory of what had happened... until a Dementor dragged it out of her.

"Deanna? Deanna, are you all right?"

Deanna blinked, looking up into Luella's eyes, much as she'd done after returning to the world the first time. She fought the urge to laugh. Lu, you really haven't got a clue, have you?

"I saw Lily Potter murdered," Deanna said, her voice sounding as dead as Lily and James now were. "I didn't know it until the Dementors made me remember, so I couldn't see the Thestrals before. Now though..." She fell silent, wishing she could make the memory go away. Twelve years on, and it still felt as if it had happened yesterday. Before the tears could fall again, Luella had stepped forward, gathering Deanna into her arms.

"Sirius Black is so dead, Lu," Deanna gasped into Luella's robes, fighting tears.

"I know, I know," Luella soothed her. "Come on, the coaches are waiting. Let's get you home."

Deanna nodded dumbly, accepting a nervous hug from Marlie, and nodding goodbye to Professor Lupin. Then, helped by Luella and Rianne, she boarded the nearest coach.

Lupin and Marlie watched as the carriages finally pulled away, waving as they disappeared.

"Well, that's term over with," Lupin sighed, sounding rather relieved. He turned to Marlie, looking rather concerned. "And you're staying here all on your own. Marlene, are you sure you're going to be all right? You never struck me as the solitary, introspective type."

"Oh, I'll be fine," said Marlie, trying to sound casual. "I just needed a bit of me time, that's all."

"Hmm." Lupin appeared unconvinced. "Well, if you say so. I'm not going to tell you what to do. But if you get lonely at any point, feel free to drop by my office for tea and a chat. My door is always open." He paused. "Well, not during the middle of the night, obviously. I think we might both get in trouble for that."

Marlie laughed nervously, trying to repress the thought of sneaking into Professor Lupin's room at night... finding him lying in bed... I wonder what he wears at night... Despite herself, she found her gaze drawn once more to his eyes, twin orbs of amber that she could quite easily lose herself in, framed by that soft brown hair that, although greying, looked soft to the touch. Oh god, please, touch me, I want you so much...

"Lupin. I thought I might find you here." Snape's voice snapped Marlie back to reality in a second. Gritting her teeth, she forced a smile as her house head swept into view.

"Good morning, Severus," Lupin greeted him, with no hint of animosity whatsoever. "What can I do for you?"

Snape just sneered at him, causing Marlie to bristle. What had Lupin ever done to him?

"The Headmaster is hosting an end of term gathering for Hogwarts staff in the staff room. Your presence is requested, Lupin."

"All right, I'm on my way. Thank you, Severus." He smiled at the other wizard, who responded with a disgusted sneer, pointedly moving away as Lupin walked past. Lupin ignored him, turning back to Marlie with a smile that set her heart fluttering. "I'll see you later then, Marlene. Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas, sir!" Marlie called back, feeling certain that she must be grinning like a fool but not caring. Until that is, Professor Snape turned his attention to her.

"So. You've decided to stay then."

Marlie backed off, glaring at him with as much irritation as she felt safe showing him.

"Yeah. So?"

"So I hope you're not expecting members of Hogwarts staff to keep you entertained while you're here."

Marlie scowled. Yeah right, as if there was any chance she'd turn to him for entertainment... "No, sir."

"Good. I am very pleased to hear it." He paused, looking at her oddly. "Miss Lovegood, if it's not too personal a question, might I ask exactly why you're staying here without your friends? Your parents assure me that there's no problem at home that they're aware of; so why are you still here? I don't agree with Professor Lupin about much, but he's certainly right about you not being the solitary type. Are you sure you're not going to go mad from boredom?"

Marlie shrugged. "Dunno. Just fancied a change. I don't need to have my friends around all the time, you know."

"Really." Snape raised an eyebrow, an odd sort of expression on his face, rather like Deanna when she was desperately trying to look serious, but was in actual fact in imminent danger of bursting into laughter; except that couldn't possibly be the reason. Snape didn't laugh. Or smile, unless Slytherin were winning, or he was taking points off Gryffindor, or making first years cry or something. "Well, Miss

Lovegood, I shall leave you to your own devices. While I certainly have no intention of taking responsibility for keeping you entertained all holidays, if you need me, you know where to find me. If my presence is required in an emergency and I am not in my quarters for any reason, throw some Floo powder in the common room fireplace or the fireplace in my office and call my name - it'll activate the fireplace nearest to me."

"OK, I'll bear that in mind," Marlie replied, wondering why he'd not be in his quarters... before deciding she'd really rather not know.

"Indeed," Snape nodded, before turning to leave. As he reached the entrance of Hogwarts, he turned once more. "Oh, and Miss Lovegood."

"Yes?"

"Merry Christmas."

As Rianne had predicted, Sirius was in the Shrieking Shack, huddled in a full-length leather coat that Marlie had ordered from one of Deanna's catalogues, trying to warm himself next to the Smokeless Fire.

"Cold?" asked Marlie, as she emerged from the trapdoor and shifted into her human form again.

"Bloody freezing," Sirius replied. He glanced up and did a double take. "You're still here?"

"Yeah," Marlie nodded, grinning slyly at him. "Didn't I tell you I was staying over?"

Sirius shook his head. "No, you never said a word!" He broke out into a grin. "You're really staying?"

"Bit late to change my mind," Marlie replied as she settled down beside him. "Coaches have gone, and they'll be boarding the train by now."

"Yeah, I know, I was watching them leave from that hill that overlooks Hogsmeade. Thought about watching from the front of Hogwarts, but

there were too many people and not enough cover. Felt safer from up there."

"So you didn't see Deanna off then."

Sirius shook his head. "No. I wanted to, but... well. With all those teachers around, it didn't seem like a good idea. Did everything go OK?"

"Not bad... except we found out Deanna can see Thestrals."

Sirius froze. "What? Who'd she see die?"

"Lily Potter. She was there when Voldemort killed her. Except she didn't remember until the Dementors made her remember, so she couldn't see them until now. She was a bit upset when she found out what it meant - think it brought it all back to her."

"I bet," Sirius whispered, closing his eyes. "God help me, kitten, when I find that rat, he's in for a whole world of pain." He opened them again, glaring. "She's fifteen years old, Marls. No one should be able to see Thestrals at that age."

"Can you see them?" Marlie asked. Sirius just laughed.

"Yeah, of course. You could hardly avoid it during the war, especially in my line of work."

"No, suppose not," said Marlie thoughtfully. She shuddered as she realised who else could probably see Thestrals. "God, my mum can probably see them."

Sirius nodded. "Yeah. She can."

"That's so weird," Marlie shivered. "I can't imagine my mum, you know, killing people."

Sirius reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder. "She always tried to avoid it, kitten. She hated using Unforgivables, it always affected her worse than anyone else I knew. Some of the others

thought she was a bit of a wuss, but I think she was one of the strongest Aurors we had." He squeezed her shoulder, trying to cheer her up. "Kitten, don't let it get to you. The Mel Lovegood I knew was a good Auror. She wasn't some psychotic murderer. She only killed when she had to, and she had a pretty narrow definition of when that was."

Marlie clutched his hand, sighing. "Yeah, I know... it just seems weird, you know. Thinking of her fighting. I mean, she's just Mum, you know? She's not like Deanna's mum, wandering around in leather, with a training room and weapons all over the house. She's just... my mum."

"And that's as it should be," Sirius smiled, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. "That's why she was fighting, why we were all fighting. So your generation could grow up thinking of ours as just Mum and Dad."

"I don't think of you as anyone's Dad," Marlie pointed out. Sirius glanced at his feet.

"Thanks to Wormtail," he said bitterly. "You know, we should never have been like this, you know? Never sitting next to each other, chatting as equals, hanging around like mates. I should have been your best mate's dad!"

"Sirius..." Marlie began, stroking his arm. Sirius just looked at her, an odd half-smile on his face.

"See," he said quietly. "Exactly how many of your friends' fathers would you feel comfortable stroking the arms of?"

"Do you mind?" Marlie asked hesitantly. "I mean, would you prefer it if you just saw me as some friend of your daughter's?"

"I'm not sure," Sirius shrugged. Then he smiled. "Somehow, I doubt I'd ever have seen you just as one of Deanna's friends. You're pretty cool in your own right."

"Damn right," said Marlie. Sirius burst out laughing, the depressed mood passing as quickly as it had come.

"That's my little kitten," he said proudly. "God, it's probably a good thing I wasn't there to see you grow up. Believe it or not, things are actually less complicated this way. We don't have to worry about what anyone else thinks, well, apart from Rianne, but knowing how that one's mind works, I don't think we really need to worry about her."

"Not half," said Marlie, knowing all too well how Rianne's mind worked. Sirius winked at her knowingly, before pausing to look at her, his whole demeanour becoming surprisingly gentle.

"Thank you," he said softly, putting an arm around her. "For staying, I mean. I thought I'd be on my own for two weeks. Didn't expect... didn't expect you to keep me company. Thanks."

Marlie couldn't help herself. Flinging caution to the winds, she wrapped her arms around his waist in turn, snuggling against his chest.

"You crazy fool, you," she murmured, noting, and not for the first time, how comfy Sirius's shoulder was. "Couldn't leave you all on your own over Christmas, could I?"

Sirius shrugged. "Don't know. You might. You've got your own life, after all. You don't have to keep running around keeping me entertained the whole time. Don't you want to see your family again?"

"Yeah, but I see them every year," Marlie pointed out. "And they can cope without me, I'm sure." She looked up at him then, her voice softening as she stroked his cheek. "I'm not so sure about you."

Sirius bit his lip, strong emotion in his eyes. Next thing she knew, Marlie found herself swept up into Sirius's arms, pressed hard against his chest, one hand ferociously stroking her hair.

"You are so lovely, you know," she heard him murmur. "You really are. Just such a sweet girl..." He broke off, and she heard him sigh. "Of all the people who might have found me, what did I do to end up with you?" He let her go, and Marlie found herself confronted with the sight of a smile that had melted countless hearts before hers.

"Thank you," Sirius breathed. Marlie tried to think of a coherent response, but something in that smile appeared to have robbed her of

the ability to string two words together. Swallowing, she settled for smiling back and hoping she didn't look like too much of an idiot.

Fortunately, Sirius didn't seem to notice. Dropping his eyes, he looked away, the dazzling smile that made everything else in the room fade away disappeared itself, making him now look almost nervous.

"So now what?" he asked. "Got anything planned? Come on, I know you've got something up your sleeve. Surprised you've not come up with any decorations - I would have thought you'd be in here setting up a tree or something."

Which was a very good point - Marlie had always loved Christmas for that very reason; she adored decorating the tree. However, she had her reasons.

"What would be the point of that?" Marlie asked casually. "Seeing as you're not spending Christmas in here."

"I'm not?" Sirius frowned.

"No," Marlie grinned. "You're getting to spend it somewhere civilised instead!"

"I am?"

"Yep. See, it turns out everyone else has gone home this Christmas, which means I've got the whole of the Serpents' Nest to myself. Now, not wanting to go completely mad and end up talking to the walls, I thought it might be an idea if I had a bit of company. Wanna join me?" She looked at him hopefully, hair slightly falling in front of one eye. She hoped he'd take her up on the offer, but you could never tell with Sirius. Of course, if she'd had any idea how she looked to him right at that moment, she wouldn't have worried. Right at that second, Sirius was thinking that she was the very picture of Cute and Utterly Adorable, and would no more have turned her down than he'd have said no to an official Ministry pardon and the chance to personally strangle Wormtail.

manage. "I like it. It reminds me of my old flat. Except posher and cleaner, obviously."

Marlie still didn't entirely believe him – but that smile had a way of winning her over. "Come on," she said firmly, thrusting the rucksack at him. "Let's get your accommodation sorted out, shall we?"

After a brief encounter with the boy-repellent barrier that shielded the Slytherin girls' dormitories from intruders, and the discovery (by Marlie anyway; Sirius appeared to be well aware of this particular loophole already) that shifting into one's Animagus form allowed one to circumvent it, Marlie finally showed Sirius into her own dorm.

"Well, this is it," she announced proudly. "Home sweet Slytherin home." Sirius halted at the door, a little uncertain. Marlie turned to see what the problem was. Her companion was standing there slightly awkwardly, looking about him as if he'd never seen the inside of a girls' dormitory before (and Marlie sincerely doubted that this was the case). "Sirius? Are you coming in or not?"

"Yeah, I guess," said Sirius halfheartedly, but he made no motion to do so. Instead, he turned to her. "Marls, are you sure about this? I mean, me staying in Slytherin is one thing, but are you sure we should be sharing a room? I mean, you're a sixteen year old girl and I'm... not," he faltered, unwilling to make this any more explicit than he had to.

Marlie just shrugged. "So? You're not meant to be here anyway; I don't think you're going to be in any less trouble if you're found in the boys dorms instead of the girls."

Sirius only wished he could tell her exactly what sort of trouble the two of them sharing sleeping quarters could lead to. However, he decided against it – she'd only freak out, and he didn't want to ruin things with her. He opted for the subtle approach.

"Yeah, but kitten, are you sure you really want me in here? I mean, do you really want to share your personal space with a thirty something bloke? I'm going to end up seeing you in your nightwear, for god's sake. You don't think I'll be invading your privacy?"

Marlie laughed. "I'm used to sharing with three girls, one of whom is Rianne Stormosi. Believe me, Sirius, I'm quite used to not having any privacy."

Yeah, but those three girls aren't going to sleep every night imagining you lying beneath them scratching your nails down their back, are they? Sirius could only wonder just how the hell he was going to get through the next couple of weeks without endangering either his sanity or his morals, or for that matter, Marlie's. God, she's going to think I've got food poisoning, the amount of trips to the toilets I'm going to end up having to make... Whatever she wears in bed, I hope to god it's not revealing. That's all I need, for her to start wandering around in a skimpy silken nightdress or something.

"So which bed do you want then?"

Oh bloody hell, you had to ask me that... "Which one's yours?" Sirius asked, trying not to sound too interested in the response. In answer, Marlie retreated to the one in the far corner which was still surrounded by stuff.

"This one. Duh."

"Yeah, course," Sirius laughed nervously. "And, er, which one's Rianne's?"

"The one nearest the door."

"Right," Sirius nodded. "Well, I'm not having hers. That's all I need, her making filthy comments about having had Sirius Black in her bed all Christmas." He sat down on the bed opposite Marlie's. "Whose is this?"

"Deanna's."

"That'll do." He pulled off his boots and lay back, head resting against the pillows. "So who's usually in the other bed then? Is that the other dorm mate of yours, what's her name, Layla, Helen, something like that?"

"Luella, as you would know if you'd been paying attention to a word I've been saying all term," Marlie replied. Reaching towards her bedside table, she picked up a framed

photograph and threw it over to him. "Here. That's a picture of the four of us from the end of last year. See for yourself."

Sirius caught it expertly and had a look. Four teenagers in Slytherin uniform, arms round each other, all in a very good mood, all giggling and squealing and in short behaving exactly as you would expect four celebrating fifteen year old girls to act when a camera was pointed at them.

"End of term party, was it?"

"Kind of. We'd just saved the school from an evil diary that possessed the mind of whoever wrote in it and a basilisk that was Petrifying students. Also I'd just been woken up from a coma, and Lu had just been reinstated at school after being wrongfully expelled." She noticed the look on Sirius's face, a mixture of polite disbelief and wariness. "What? Could have happened to anyone..."

"Yeah, but strange how these things always seem to happen to you, eh?" Sirius grinned, turning his attention back to the photograph. Marlie and Rianne were easy to pick out – neither had changed much in the six months since that picture had been taken. Rianne was blowing a kiss at the camera and winking flirtatiously, while Marlie was giggling at something and resting her head on another girl's shoulder. A girl Sirius recognised instantly, even though he'd only ever seen her in imperfect dog's vision since leaving Azkaban.

"That's Deanna," he said softly. "Next to you."

"That's right," Marlie grinned. "In a good mood for once, which doesn't happen all that often, let me tell you."

"She's pretty," Sirius murmured, tracing his stepdaughter's cheek fondly. "Nice seeing her in colour for once."

"How can you tell?" Marlie muttered. "She's got pale skin, dark eyes and hair, and only ever wears black."

Sirius didn't seem to have heard her. His attention had been caught by the girl on Deanna's other side, a girl he'd not seen before, but who looked strangely familiar. She actually reminded him of Medea, if the truth be known.

"That's Luella?" he asked, fascinated.

"That's right."

"And she's Muggle-born, right?"

"Yep. Her dad's an accountant from Surrey."

Sirius continued to watch Luella for a bit, frowning. So if she was just a Home Counties Muggle-born, why did everything about her scream Tal-y-Rhys? Why did she seem so familiar, come to that? He'd never had much call to visit Surrey – it had been made abundantly clear to his clan on many, many occasions that they weren't welcome there. He found it hard to believe that he'd ever crossed paths with her or any of her family. It was a mystery. Making a mental note to keep an eye on this Luella, he handed the picture back to Marlie.

"So those are your friends then." He grinned, something occurring to him. "Good god, kitten, if only my sixteen year old self could see me now. I mean, true, I'm wanted for murder and the whole of Great Britain wants my blood, but on the other hand, I'm getting to spend two weeks in the Slytherin dorms. How cool is that?"

Marlie wrinkled her nose. "If you say so, Padfoot."

"Oh, it is, believe me. God, we spent half our school days trying to get into the Slytherin common room. And now, here I am, not only allowed in the common room, but sleeping in the bloody girls' dorms!" He rubbed his hands gleefully. "And it's a dorm shared by four of the best looking girls in Slytherin at that. I mean, true, one of them's my kid, and only one of the others is here, but that's not the point. I am sleeping in a Slytherin girls' dorm, and I'm sharing it with Narcissa Harker's lookalike niece. Oh god, if I had known at sixteen that this was how I'd end up, I'd have been the happiest bloke in Gryffindor, kitten."

"You big perv," Marlie observed. "So, you had a bit of a crush on Narcissa, did you?"

"A bit of a crush? Kitten, she was the sexiest witch in the school, bar none." Sirius's eyelids lowered, giving him an oddly hungry look as he

reminisced. "God, was she fit. The subject of many a lonely night's wishful thinking, she was."

"Sirius!" Marlie squealed, clapping her hands to her ears. "I do not want to hear this! I don't want to know about you doing... stuff... to people. It's freaky." She shivered, trying to banish the mental image of a young Sirius lying in bed, thinking about having sex with Narcissa.

"Freaky, is it?" Sirius laughed. He leaned over, an evil glint in his eyes. "So you definitely don't want to hear about her luring me off to the Quidditch changing rooms when I was thirteen and relieving me of my virginity then?"

Marlie shrieked in horror, closing her eyes as yet more mental images of Sirius and Narcissa flooded her brain. "Sirius Black, I hate you!" she screamed at him. Sirius, smirking with pride, silently punched the air and slid off the bed.

"And on that note," he announced, "I am going to have a shower. I shall leave you to your own devices. See you later, little kitten!" With that, he sauntered out, singing "One nil to the Gryffindor!" to the tune of
'Go West' as he went.

Marlie gritted her teeth, wondering what on earth she'd let herself in for... and more to the point, how exactly she was meant to stop thinking about Sirius Black losing his virginity to someone who in every scene was starting to bear an ever closer resemblance to her... Stop that, she told herself. We're just mates. He doesn't see me that way. He wouldn't do that. He likes me, he's not after a shag. Although certain comments he'd made... No. She shook her head. He was just teasing her. That was all. Freaking her out with freaky mental images just to get a reaction. Yes, that was more like it. So, reassured, she retrieved Snowy from where he'd been taking cover under the bed, doing her best to block out the distant sound of Sirius calling out "I'm naked and in the Slytherin girls' showers! My sixteen year old self would be sick with envy if he could see this!"

The days passed. For the first day, Marlie went to meals in the Great Hall religiously and ate calmly, and every time, she'd stealthily palm some of the food into a napkin and stash it in her bag to give to Padfoot later on. And on the first evening, Sirius taught her how to sneak into the kitchen and talk the House Elves into giving her enough food to feed them both for three days at least.

It proved to be simplicity itself, and Marlie promised there and then that when she next saw her brother, she was going to 'have a right go' at him for making it look like such hard work all this time.

On the second day, Marlie discovered that Sirius had the ability to partially shapeshift, allowing him to combine a dog's senses with his human form. By evening on the second day, Sirius was merrily engaged in teaching Marlie how to do the same, allowing her to experience a cat's reflexes and senses while human. Not to mention that shifting her hands into cat's paws, complete with retractable five-inch claws, made an excellent weapon in a fight.

"Now, now, kitten," Sirius scolded gently, as Marlie admired her new 'nail extensions' in awe. "I hope you're only going to use your new powers for good."

"Oh yeah," Marlie breathed, eyes gleaming as the firelight reflected off keratin knives. "Yeah, no worries. Just for good purposes. Absolutely."

Sirius rolled his eyes. He'd heard that before, usually from his own lips. "Oh god, I've created a monster," he murmured. Unfortunately for him, thanks to his training, he couldn't get away with muttering under his breath any more.

"I heard that!"

On the third day, Marlie decided to at least make a start on her holiday homework. Sirius idly flicked through her notes and textbooks, and before Marlie knew it, Sirius had started writing some of her essays for her.

"Look! I've written your Transfiguration essay for you! Aren't I lovely?"

Marlie took it from him and scanned it, eyes widening as she realised that it wasn't actually bad. In fact, not only was it not bad, it was likely to earn its writer top marks with no problem.

"Oh!" she gasped, flinging her arms around him. "Sirius, it's perfect! Thank you!" She kissed him on the cheek, too overcome with gratitude to notice that he actually blushed, looking away bashfully. She turned back to the essay, only needing transcribing to make it complete. "You've even left spelling and grammar mistakes in it too so it'll look like I wrote it!"

"Eh!" Sirius's smile was instantly wiped off his face as he sat up, glaring. "What do you mean, spelling and grammar mistakes?"

"Ah. Er... forget I said anything?"

"Cheeky cow."

And then finally came the day Marlie had been eagerly waiting for: Christmas Day.

Of course, she hadn't banked on it starting as early as it did. The first thing she was aware of was twelve stone of hyperactive Animagus landing on her.

"Aargh! Bloodyfuckinghell, gerroffme!"

Sirius ignored her, choosing to continue lying on top of her instead. "Wake up, kitten! It's CHRISTMAS!" he yelled in her ear.

"God," Marlie moaned piteously, desperately attempting to burrow under the blankets. "Yes, I know it's Christmas. Merry Christmas to you too. Now can I please go back to sleep?"

"Sleep?" Sirius demanded. "How can you just turn over and go back to sleep? It's Christmas morning! You can't sleep on Christmas morning!"

"Watch me." Marlie rolled over and prepared to fall blissfully into oblivion once more.

"Kitten!" Sirius whined. "Don't be like that!" He began to bounce up and down, successfully keeping her conscious. "Come on, rise and shine! You've got presents, look!" He rolled off her, indicating the pile of boxes at the foot of the bed.

Marlie glanced up, yawned, and slowly dragged herself up onto one elbow. Seeing as Sirius clearly had no intention of letting her sleep unmolested, she might as well get up. Vaguely noticing the presents, she turned to look at Sirius. He was lying next to her, dressed in a white vest and matching boxer shorts, black hair loose and falling around his shoulders, head propped up on one elbow, grinning up at her and looking surprisingly

healthy. A comfy bed, regular baths and showers, and good food, served often, were clearly agreeing with him.

"That's better," he noted. "God, what does it take to wake you up in the morning? I called your name three times, tried shaking you, but nothing. Hope to god they never have to evacuate this place in the middle of the night. They'd have to levitate the bed out of here."

"As long as they don't wake me up, I don't care what they do," Marlie yawned. She blinked at Sirius, rubbing her eyes. Something was different about him... not only did he look healthier, he looked a great deal younger. Now while comfy living could be said to have helped, it surely couldn't have made that much of a difference, could it? She looked again... and realised what he'd done to himself.

"You've shaved!" It was true. Sirius Black, for the first time since she'd known him, was lying before her, completely clean shaven.

"I have," Sirius grinned. He indicated his hair, now resting on his shoulders instead of hanging down his back. "I gave myself a haircut too. Got sick of my hair taking forever to dry after getting out of the shower. Do you like it?"

"It's different," said Marlie, eyeing him up uncertainly. Truth be told, she didn't really have an opinion one way or the other... although part of her found it weirdly alluring. "Makes you look younger."

"Why, thank you," Sirius purred, making Marlie feel oddly nervous. "I shall remember that." He immediately reverted back to his more usual overgrown child persona. "So, did you order it then? Did you? Did you? Hmm?"

"Of course I did," Marlie sniffed. "Don't you trust me?"

"You might have forgotten," Sirius pointed out.

"What, with you reminding me every time I saw you? Every five minutes I was in your company? Hardly." Marlie smiled, rather touched at how much this meant to Sirius. "Don't worry. I ordered it just as you asked, asking for it to be delivered anonymously to Harry at Gryffindor Tower on Christmas morning. It'll be there. Don't worry. Your little godson's going to love it."

Sirius actually squealed in delight at this, before realising how unmanly he sounded and covering it with a cough, swiftly pitching his voice a full octave lower than his usual speaking voice to compensate.

"Yeah. Yeah, course he will. He's thirteen. All thirteen year old wizards like fast and expensive racing brooms, don't they?"

"Well, not all of them," Marlie replied, Neville Longbottom coming to mind. She noticed a hint of panic creeping into Sirius's eyes. "But Harry does. And he will love this broom, I guarantee it."

Sirius did not look entirely convinced. "Are you sure?" he began nervously. "I mean, I've not bought him a present since he was in nappies. I have no idea what he likes or doesn't like! Suppose I've got it wrong? Suppose he hates it? Suppose he never speaks to me again?" He paused, remembering his current situation. "Admittedly, he's not speaking to me anyway, but I wouldn't want him to have a genuine reason."

"Sirius," Marlie said gently, touched by his anxiety over Harry. "He's going to love it. You did just fine. And I'm sure when you've cleared your name, you'll be the best godfather ever, and he'll think you're wonderful."

"Really?" Sirius asked, hope shining out of his eyes.

"Really."

Sirius practically glowed for all of two seconds, before anxiety reclaimed him. "You couldn't... you couldn't go and check for me, could you? Just to... just to see if he really likes it?"

Marlie stared at Sirius. "You want me... to spend Christmas morning... in Gryffindor. Watching Harry open his presents so you can find out if your Quidditch-playing, broomless, thirteen year old, male, godson will appreciate being given the fastest and most stylish broom on the market."

"Um... yeah," said Sirius sheepishly. "If it's not too much trouble?"

Marlie glared at him, all the more annoyed because part of her knew that she was going to end up giving in to him, again. He was even making those sad yet hopeful eyes at her.

"Bloody hell, Padfoot, how do you always get me to do these stupid things for you?" Marlie scowled, getting out of bed.

"You'll do it?" Sirius asked, breaking into a smile. Marlie savagely repressed the urge to start returning it – barely.

"Yeah, I'll do it," she muttered, reaching for her clothes, only to be interrupted by a hyperactive Animagus pouncing on her for the second time that morning.

"Thank you!" Sirius gasped, hugging her hard enough to risk cracking a rib. Fortunately, he seemed to realise that perhaps he was overdoing it a bit, because he let her go again as soon as he'd started. "Er, I mean... thanks," he said shyly.

"Don't push it," Marlie warned him. "I'm only doing this because you can't go yourself. Trust me, if it were down to me, I'd be opening my presents about now." She paused. "Actually, if it were down to me, I'd still be in bed, fast asleep. But can't have everything, can we?" Collecting her things, she prepared to leave. "I shall see you later. Goodbye, you annoying pain in the arse, you."

"Ah, you're such an old romantic," Sirius grinned. "See ya later, kitten. I'll be waiting."

"I'm sure you will," Marlie murmured, as she left to have a shower and get dressed before heading out. Sirius watched her go, before diving under Marlie's recently vacated sheets, that were still replete with her scent and the warmth of her body, and supremely comfortable to boot. If he snuggled right underneath the blankets, closed his eyes and imagined hard enough, he could almost believe she was curled up there with him. Well, almost. But unless hell froze over and Marlie suddenly started to find him irresistible, it would have to do.

"You'd better believe it, Marls," he murmured to himself, suddenly feeling unaccountably drowsy, "I'll wait forever if I have to. Forever..." Closing his eyes, he snuggled into the pillow that could pass for Marlie's hair if you let it, and prepared to dream of blondes.

Marlie slipped into the Gryffindor common room, hoping to find it as deserted as her own was. After all, it was still early; without overexcited fugitives around to pounce on them, they might all be in bed still. However, it was not to be. Hermione was up, busily stoking the fire. On hearing the door close, she looked up and squealed, delighted to see 'her' cat again.

"Cleo!" she cried, scooping Marlie up into her arms and holding tightly on to her. "You're here! I thought you'd gone home with your owner! Oh, it's so good to see you again, I've barely seen you this last month!" It was true; end of term deadlines had severely restricted Marlie's excursions to Gryffindor lately. Hermione must have thought I'd abandoned her, Marlie thought guiltily to herself. She tried not to think of what would happen when Wormtail was finally caught and she didn't have to do this any more.

Hermione was reaching for part of the Gryffindor Christmas decorations, which appeared to be standard magical fare, and collected a short length of tinsel.

"Hold still, Cleo," Hermione scolded as Marlie squirmed. "It's Christmas Day, you want to look nice on Christmas Day, don't you?"

Marlie privately thought that she looked quite cute enough without any added adornments, but it didn't seem like she had a choice in the matter, as Hermione tied the tinsel around her neck in a bow.

"There!" Hermione announced, apparently quite satisfied with her handiwork. "You look very pretty, Cleo."

I look bloody ridiculous, Marlie thought, mentally cursing Sirius. Why couldn't she just say no to him once in a while, eh?

"Now, let's go and see the boys, eh?" Hermione said. "See what they've got for Christmas." With Marlie cradled in her arms, Hermione headed for the boys' dormitories, which apparently did not have girl-repellent barriers on them. This was either incredibly patronising and sexist, or a cynical pragmatic response to the reality of which sex was likely to do most of the sneaking into the other's accommodation. Marlie wasn't sure which.

Hermione entered the dormitory shared by Ron and Harry without knocking.

"Merry Christmas!" she called as she walked in.

"Merry Christmas," both boys replied automatically. Most of the presents had been opened already, but there were a few of Harry's that were still intact. Right at that moment, Harry was eyeing up a large square box that proved to be from Caitlin Tyler.

"Oh, she's sent you a present?" Hermione asked, sitting on Seamus's bed, Marlie cradled in her lap.

"Yeah," Harry whispered, stunned. "I didn't know she was going to... I mean, I haven't even got her anything! I gave Deanna a card for her, you know, to say thank you for everything, but I never got her a present!" He stared wildly at his friends. "What am I going to do?"

Ron looked at him as if he'd gone nuts. "Open it, you daft bugger!" he said with a snort. "Then write her a nice letter thanking her, adding a few things about school and that, and wishing her a Merry Christmas. Bloody hell, Harry, I know your aunt and uncle didn't really do Christmas, but I'd have thought you'd have worked out how it went by now!"

"Ron," Hermione scolded him. "Stop being insensitive." She turned to Harry expectantly. "Go on then, Harry. Open it!"

Harry did so, revealing a wooden chest, with the key taped to it. Exchanging inquisitive glances with Harry and Ron, he retrieved the key and unlocked it. Lifting the lid, he gasped at the contents. Inside was a glass bowl, a vial of a silver potion, and a letter addressed to him, in Caitlin Tyler's handwriting. Ron and Hermione both crowded round to have a look, with Marlie in Hermione's arms, watching curiously. Ron gasped as he saw the contents.

"Bloody hell, Harry!" he whispered. "That's a Pensieve! She's only gone and got you a bloody Pensieve!"

"A what?" Harry asked, still dazed.

"A Pensieve," Hermione explained. "It's a bowl full of liquid that you can use to store your thoughts and memories in. And they're really expensive!" She indicated the letter. "Go on, read the letter, see what it says!"

Fingers shaking, Harry ripped the letter open, three sets of eyes on him. Unable to quell her curiosity, Marlie slipped out of Hermione's arms and crawled next to Harry, curling up in his lap so she could read too. Harry raised an eyebrow, gave her a half-smile, and began stroking her fur as he read. Marlie purred, deciding there and then that Harry wasn't bad for a Gryffindor. She turned her attention to the letter, which read as follows:

Dear Harry,

Merry Christmas, cariad! If you're reading this, then you already know what my gift to you is. I hope you can forgive my presumption in sending you this, but your aunt and uncle never struck me as the most generous and giving people, so I decided you should have a proper present this year. I do hope you don't mind.

Assuming Hermione or Ron haven't already identified it for you, this is a Pensieve, a magical device used to store and view a person's

memories. I've enclosed the instructions on how to use it with this letter, but there's something else I need to add regarding this Pensieve. You see, I took the liberty of copying some of my own memories into it first. You were just a year old when your parents died, and I know you don't have any memories of them... so I've sent you mine. Add the potion to the bowl and follow the instructions, and you'll be able to see all my memories of your parents. (Well, not all of them, obviously. I've only included the ones suitable for a thirteen year old's eyes. Ask me again when you're older, and I may provide some more for you.) Your parents were good friends to me, Harry, two very special people, and I think it's unfair that you know next to nothing about them. So here it is, my gift to you – get to know them, who they were, what they were like. You'll find most of them tend to involve your mum rather than your dad – she was my best friend, after all. I'm afraid I wasn't as close to your dad as I'd have liked, not until they moved in with us anyway. But he's still in here, don't worry.

Anyway, I hope you like it, and that you're not upset or offended or anything. I wasn't sure whether this would be appropriate or not, but Deanna talked me into it. Do let me know what you thought of it! And don't worry if you haven't got me a present. Harry, you don't owe me anything; I'm the one who let you down by not taking you after your parents died. All I ask is that you stay in touch, and don't keep me out of your life. That's all I ask from you.

Again, Merry Christmas, and I hope you like the Pensieve!

Lots of love,

Caitlin

Harry passed the letter to Ron, speechless. Ron scanned it quickly, before staring at Harry.

"Your parents are in there?" he whispered. Harry nodded, clutching Marlie to his chest, not trusting himself not to start crying or something. Hermione bit her lip, almost as affected as Harry was.

"Oh Harry!" she breathed. "That's so nice of her! Are you going to look at them now?"

"Maybe later," Harry managed to get out despite the sudden lump in his throat. He replaced the letter in the box, and snapped it shut. Passing the cat back to Hermione, he stored the box under the bed. If he started going through the memories now, he knew he'd cry, and he couldn't have that, not in front of Ron anyway.

"What else is there?" he asked, hoping to change the subject. As if in answer, the cat wriggled out of Hermione's grasp, and began pawing at the last unopened package, meowing loudly.

"Hey," Hermione called, gathering the cat up again. "Leave it alone, it isn't yours." The cat responded with an expression that was the nearest feline equivalent to a pout, nuzzling against Hermione and purring. Hermione instantly forgave the cat, cuddling it and cooing over it. Ron, grimacing, passed the package over to Harry.

"Here. Open it quick, before the cuteness makes me ill." Grinning, Harry took it off him and checked for a label. There wasn't one.

"Hmm, no label," he frowned. "Wonder who it's from?"

"Maybe there's one inside," Ron prompted. "Go on, open it."

Harry did so, and fell back, astonished, as a silver broom, gleaming in the crisp morning light, rolled out and began to hover above the bed. It was a Firebolt, a beautiful, shining Firebolt, the broom of every young Quidditch fan's dreams... and it was Harry's.

"It's a Firebolt," Harry gasped. "Someone sent me a Firebolt!" He locked eyes with Ron, who appeared as stunned as he was. "I've got a Firebolt, Ron! A real, live Firebolt!" He and Ron hugged each other, both shouting with joy. Next to them, even Cleo was chasing her tail and meowing, before realising how silly she looked, and starting to wash herself as though that was what she had intended to do all along.

"Someone bought me a Firebolt, I don't believe it," Harry said hoarsely. "Who the hell would buy me one of those?"

"Caitlin Tyler," said Ron immediately. "She likes you and she's got money. Word must have got back to her after all."

Harry shook his head. "No, she already got me the Pensieve. Besides, she wouldn't have sent it anonymously."

"What about Dumbledore?" said Ron. "He gave you the cloak after all."

"Yeah, but that was my dad's, he was just giving it back to me. He wouldn't spend that amount of money on a student."

"Lupin then," said Ron. "He must have heard about it and felt sorry for you."

Harry shook his head, doubtful. "Lupin's not got that sort of money. He'd buy himself some new robes if he had." He turned to Hermione. "What do you think, Hermione? Any idea?"

Curled up next to Hermione, Marlie glanced up, and went still. It was immediately obvious that Hermione did not share the feelings of the two boys. She'd folded her arms and was frowning in a way that reminded Marlie of a combination of Professor McGonagall and her mum.

"Hermione?" Harry asked, concerned. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, but..." Hermione stared at the broom, clearly worried. "I'm not sure about that broom."

"What's the matter with you?" Ron asked, rolling his eyes. "It's a top broom, look at it!"

"Exactly," said Hermione. "It must have cost a fortune."

"Probably more than all the Slytherins' brooms put together," said Ron happily. Marlie glared at him... and froze. In Ron's pyjama pocket, something was stirring. Sure enough, Scabbers poked his nose out to see what was going on. Marlie stayed still, entranced. All her predator instincts had just gone into overdrive, biological instincts overriding higher levels of thought. In the background, Ron and Hermione were still bickering.

"So who would send someone a broom that expensive and not even tell him they'd sent it?" Hermione was arguing. "Who does Harry know

that can even afford it? Only Mrs. Tyler, and she would have included a card."

"Oh who cares who sent it?" Ron snapped. He turned back to the broom, gazing at it in awe. "Can I have a go on it later, Harry? Can I? Please?"

"No!" Hermione cried, causing everyone to jump. "I don't think anyone should be riding that broom!"

Both boys, and the cat, turned to look at her, the boys wondering what on earth had got into her. Marlie, however, guessed exactly what was on Hermione's mind – Hermione suspected a trap. Hermione suspected that the broom was from Sirius Black, and she was right too, although for all the wrong reasons. Time for a distraction. Gathering her strength, Marlie pounced straight at the rat in Ron's breast pocket.

"ARRGHH!" Ron yelled. "GET THAT BLOODY CAT OUT OF HERE!" Grabbing the rat by the tail with one hand, he tried to push the cat off with the other, as its claws raked his pyjamas. Marlie, judging everyone to be sufficiently distracted, leapt to the floor, nimbly avoiding a kick from Ron, which ended up striking Harry's trunk instead. She repressed a grin as Ron hopped around in pain... until it became her turn to cry out in agony. A high-pitched whine emanated from the trunk, piercing enough for human ears, but for a cat's sensitive ears, absolutely paralysing. Desperate to get away from the pain, Marlie hissed at the trunk and raced for the door, wincing as Harry reached into his trunk for the source of the sound, which turned out to be a Pocket Sneakoscope. Harry was already replacing it amongst his clothes, deadening the sound, but it was too late for Marlie. Ears still ringing in pain, she ran for all she was worth, desperate for Slytherin and safety. An all too familiar refrain began to run through her head: Sirius Black had better be extremely grateful for this...

Back in Slytherin, Sirius, by now fully dressed, was sitting on Marlie's bed dangling a shoelace in front of Snowy, watching the cat attempt to stalk and pounce on it.

"That's right, cat, you tell that shoelace," Sirius encouraged him. "You show it who's boss! That's it, get yer teeth into it, mate! No two-bit shoelace messes with you, eh Snowy?" He looked up as another white blur streaked into the room, leaping on to the bed and flinging itself into his lap, meowing pitifully. Snowy immediately abandoned the shoelace and approached the other cat, making little chirruping noises as he began to lick the newcomer. Marlie meowed all the more, rubbing up against her pet.

"Kitten?" Sirius asked. "Something wrong?" Snowy looked at him as if he was completely stupid, and backed off. Marlie shifted back into human form, clutching her ears.

"God, my ears," she moaned. "My head! That really hurt..."

"Aw, kitten," Sirius murmured, instantly solicitous. "Here, lie down. Let me." He motioned for her to lie face down, and perched himself next to her. "What happened, mate? Are you alright?" If someone has deliberately hurt her, there will be hell to pay, and screw the consequences!

"Bloody Pocket Sneakoscope," Marlie muttered. "Went off near my ears. They're a million times more sensitive when I'm a cat, it was like the bloody Shuttle was taking off right next to me."

Sirius decided that now was not the best time to ask what the Shuttle was. Instead he began to massage her scalp, secretly enjoying the feel of her hair against his fingers.

"Ssshh, it's alright, darling," he murmured. "You're safe now. It's nice and quiet here, just you, me and the cat, no sudden loud noises or bright lights. Just relax, sweetie. That's right, just relax." He continued to knead her scalp, middle fingers massaging the top of

her head while his thumb and little finger went to work behind her ears. Already her breathing had changed, and her moans were no longer whimpers of pain. Sirius, seeing that she was clearly feeling better, decided to ask her about the reason he'd sent her off there in the first place.

"So, did he like it then, kitten?"

"Yes, he loved it," Marlie growled. "And behold, there was much shouting of 'woo hoo!' and 'oh my god!' and 'I've got a Firebolt!' as he and Ron both turned into gibbering wrecks at the sight of it. Not that you can tell in Ron's case, but hey. You needn't worry, Padfoot. Soon as you've cleared your name, and told him you were the one who bought him the Firebolt, he will love you forever. You'll be officially the World's Best Godfather Ever."

"Really?" Sirius asked, scarcely able to believe it. "He really liked it?"

"He liked it. In fact, as soon as Hermione's gone, I think he and Ron are planning to shag it. If you're lucky, we might be able to blag our way into the wedding."

"Perv. I'm not even going to ask what you do with yours, if that's how your mind works."

"You're calling me pervy?" Marlie raised an eyebrow. "Your mind's in the gutter so often, they're thinking of charging it rent."

"Rent?" said Sirius dismissively. "Kitten, I've got a mortgage on the bloody place. Leased from a certain Miss Stormosi – I believe you know her?"

"All too well," Marlie yawned. "So, I take it you're grateful for all the hard work I put in this morning?"

"Exceedingly. Thank you very much, dearest," said Sirius, expertly manipulating the back of Marlie's neck. Marlie, purring, leaned back into his hand.

"Good. You owe me for that, you know. My ears are still ringing." Marlie twisted around, gazing lazily at him from under heavy eyelids. "I think I deserve a massage. Don't you think?"

Sirius felt his heart quicken at that look. "Y-yeah. I think I can do that. Yeah. Massage. Excellent idea. No probs." He began to rub the base of her neck, causing Marlie to moan quietly, closing her eyes and lying down, that secretive smile still on her face as she began to slowly move, responding to his every move. Sirius, liking what he was seeing, started using two hands, starting with her scalp before moving

downwards, rubbing the nape of her neck with his thumbs, before moving on to her neck vertebrae, then her shoulders.

"Sirius..." he heard her moan. Sirius closed his eyes, his conscience telling him he should stop right now, before things got out of hand... but on the other hand, there was something in the way she said his name that went straight to his libido. Oh god. She's lying on a bed, in front of me, and every touch of my hands is making her cry out my name. Oh god. He shivered, continuing to knead her back, feeling her move beneath him, thinking he ought to stop... but his hands had other ideas. They were roaming freely over her back, probing her muscles, rubbing her skin, continuing to elicit those delightful little gasps and moans that did strange things to him, that fed his fantasies and made him wonder if that was what she sounded like during sex. Followed by the equally pervy thought that no one actually knew what this little kitten sounded like during sex... and the wild hope that maybe, just maybe, he might be the first to find out. Very unlikely, but you never knew what might happen.

Marlie for her part was beyond thinking by this point, her awareness reduced to where Sirius's fingers were touching her, manipulating her muscles and making the pain go away. Never let this stop, just keep doing this, this feels amazing... She became aware of Sirius leaning close to her, his breath on her cheek as he rubbed her shoulders, and something in the back of her mind told her that maybe she should really call a halt to proceedings... but the bits that would actually have put that order into practice were far too busy melting into the bed as her spine began to feel like it was turning into jelly.

"Sirius, yes, more," she heard herself cry. As if in answer, the rhythm of his hand movements began to change as his fingers moved to the small of her back, moving in circles, pressing harder now.

"Like this?" she heard him say, and his voice sounded different, deeper, sharper somehow, with his breath coming in gasps like her own. Odd, she hadn't though it was that physically exerting for him, but then again, what did she know?

"Yes," she breathed, closing her eyes, "exactly like that, oh god, Sirius!" She began to claw at the pillows, desperate to do something, anything, with the feelings that were growing in her belly, the on-fire feeling that had started in her groin and was now expanding outwards. "Siriussiriussirius," she moaned helplessly, and there was no doubt about it now, he was definitely reacting to her as much as she was to him.

"Kitten," she heard him growl into her ear. "Had enough yet?"

"Ye- no, don't stop," she managed to gasp out. "Please." She cried out as his thumbs pushed savagely into her back.

"Let it out, kitten," he murmured. "No one else to hear you. Are you liking this?"

"Yes," Marlie moaned, gasping as Sirius dug in again. "Yes. Yes, Sirius, yes, please, yes! Sirius!" She closed her eyes and threw her head back, crying out, hands clawing at the bedding as the wave of pleasure that had been building finally broke. In the distance, she vaguely heard Sirius murmuring "Kitten, yeah, god, yeah," but she was too busy enjoying

herself to care. Finally, exhausted, she collapsed on the bed, worn out and gasping for breath.

"Kitten?" she heard Sirius whisper, and he sounded as exhausted as she felt. "You OK?" To her surprise, she noted a hint of panic in his voice.

"Yeah," she whispered. "I think so." She rolled over, looking up at him. He was leaning over her, one hand on her other side supporting him, hair falling around his face, which was flushed as if from physical effort. "How are you?"

"Me?" Sirius laughed nervously. "Oh, I'll be alright, don't worry about me. You're the one who looks absolutely shattered."

Marlie was about to deny any such thing, but for some reason, the effort seemed too much for her. "Maybe," she agreed, closing her eyes. "Did you mean for that to happen?"

"Not exactly," said Sirius shiftily. "It, er, just turns out like that from time to time." He slid off the bed, patting her shoulder. "You get some rest. I've, er, got a call of nature to attend to. Then I'll come back and we can open your presents."

"Presents!" Marlie murmured. She'd forgotten all about her presents. "Yeah, that's nice, nice idea. Yeah. Presents. Wicked. Presents..." She let her voice trail off, the drowsiness beginning to overwhelm her. Which was good, as it meant she didn't get to see the troubled expression on Sirius's face as he made his way to the bathroom.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, arse and bollocks. Sirius stared at himself in the mirror, wondering what the hell he'd just done. Let his hormones get the better of him? Taken advantage of, possibly even sexually abused, his one ally? Used an innocent girl for his own selfish pleasure? All of the above?

"I am an utter arsehole," Sirius muttered to himself. Although sadly, not enough of an arsehole to fully enjoy it. Once more, Sirius cursed the accident of birth and rearing that had left him too principled to avoid feeling guilty about these things, but not principled enough to stay out of trouble in the first place. Why couldn't he have been either supremely self-controlled, or a complete sociopath, eh?

But she did enjoy it; it's not like you wouldn't have stopped if she'd asked. That's not the bloody point, he thought. Point is, she didn't know what you were really doing to her until it was too late for her to turn back, did she? And there was no way in hell that if he'd told her in advance, that she would ever have said yes. Hey kitten, would you like me to give you an erotic massage and use my knowledge of energy points to give you the orgasm of your life, just so I can get off on watching you come? No, of course not, she'd have slapped him and called him a filthy pervert, and quite rightly too. His only hope lay in the fact that at the moment, she didn't know exactly what he'd done... but he had no doubt

that she'd work it out soon enough, and when she did, he'd be lucky if she ever spoke to him again.

I knew something like this would happen. Bloody knew it. Knew there was no way I could spend this much time in her company without something happening. She was just too damn gorgeous, that was the problem. Too pretty, and sweet, and kindhearted, and utterly, heartbreakingly shaggable, and the worst part was, she had no idea what effect she had on him, had apparently convinced herself everything was completely platonic. He would have preferred her to be all too aware of it and intentionally toy with him, rather like Narcissa or Rianne would have. That could have been fun. But this? God, no. Honestly, she invites me to share a room with her, alone, for two whole weeks knowing my reputation and that had we been at school together, she'd be exactly my type, and then she comes running to me for comfort and snuggling, when she surely must realise I have not had sex for nearly as long as she's been alive, what the hell was she thinking? Stop that, his more principled side told him, she didn't know you felt the way you did about her. It's not her fault. You're the adult, you should have made sure nothing happened. She'd trusted him to behave – and he'd let her down.

"I'm sorry, kitten," he whispered. "I'm so sorry."

Taking a few deep breaths, he tried to calm himself down, act normal. He'd already taken care of the inevitable erection, a furtive, shameful fumble in one of the cubicles, with the evidence swiftly disposed of. He just wished he could say the same for the guilt.

Right. Time to face the music. He'd have to face her again sooner or later, and it might as well be sooner. He'd faced dark wizards trying to kill him before now, surely one teenage girl wouldn't hurt, would it? Hah. Course it would. But he'd not been sorted into Gryffindor for nothing. Shaking his hair back, he re-entered the dorm.

Marlie sat up as he walked in, and smiled, yes, actually smiled, to see him. Bloody hell, kitten, how can you look so bloody cheerful after what

I just did? Scream at me! Cry! Swear at me! Throw things! But don't bloody smile!

"Hey, Padfoot!" she greeted him. "You took your time in there, what were you doing?" She paused, face wrinkling in disgust. "Actually, don't tell me. Just tell me if it'll ever be safe to go in there again."

"Yeah," Sirius laughed nervously. "Yeah, the place is quite safe, don't worry." He sat down on Rianne's bed, facing Marlie, who was watching him, her smile replaced by a confused frown. "How are you feeling, kitten?"

"Fine, until you walked in looking like that." Marlie looked him over. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I-" Sirius stopped. He owed her honesty at least. "No, not really."

"Sirius?" Marlie's tone shifted from confused to frightened, as she got up and walked over to sit next to him. "What happened? Was- was it something I said? Something I did?"

Oh, nice one Sirius, now she thinks it's all her fault. "No, of course not!" Sirius protested. "You've done nothing wrong, kitten. It's not you... it's me." He paused, trying to gauge Marlie's reaction. She was looking at him very dubiously... and under it all, he could sense the single overriding emotion of fear. "Oh god, kitten," he sighed. "I don't even know how to begin to explain... but what happened before... it shouldn't have happened."

If anything, Marlie's fear only increased – and now he could sense hurt and pain too. This wasn't at all how he'd wanted it to go.

"Didn't you like it?" she said, in a very small, sad voice, as if she was about to burst into tears. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No!" Sirius said firmly, all the while wishing he'd never started this. "No, please, kitten, mate, don't blame yourself. It's not your fault. And yes, I liked it... but I shouldn't have, don't you see?" He hesitated, trying to frame his thoughts. "Marlie, you're sixteen, and I'm old enough to be

your father. Touching you and enjoying it, it's wrong. I went too far with you. I... Kitten, I don't think it's safe for me to be around you. I think... maybe I should go back to the Shack..."

Whatever he'd expected, he hadn't expected what happened next. At these words, Marlie really did burst into tears.

"No," she whispered. "No, you can't! You can't! Sirius Black, don't you dare leave me, you bastard, don't leave me!" she shrieked, before collapsing in tears. "Don't leave me!" she sobbed.

Sirius couldn't bear it. Throwing caution to the wind, he pulled her into his arms, letting her sob on his shoulder.

"Kitten, ssh, darling, don't cry, I'm sorry," he breathed, stroking her hair and fighting his own tears. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. C'mon, mate, don't cry. Please. I hate seeing you cry."

Marlie shook her head, tears running down her face. "You're going away," she whispered. "And I don't even know why."

Sirius pulled her even closer, feeling his own heart threatening to break. I can't do this to her. I just can't. God forgive me, but I can't bear making her cry.

"Alright," he sighed, knowing he was damned even as he said the words. "Alright, I'll stay. I... if you really want me here, I'll stay."

"Of course I want you here, you stupid man," came the muffled response from his shoulder. "I wouldn't have asked you over otherwise."

Sirius couldn't resist grinning at that. "That's more like it," he smiled, ruffling Marlie's hair. "You're annoyed with me. Back to normal."

"Course I'm annoyed with you." Marlie looked up, anger flashing in her eyes, despite the tears still on her cheeks. "God, Sirius, what is wrong with you? Why are you acting like this? Why are you talking about going away? I don't want you to go!"

"Yeah, but..." Sirius struggled to find the words to describe what had happened without actually letting her know the full story. "After what happened just now..."

Marlie shrugged. "So? What about it? You liked it, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but..."

Marlie brushed his objections aside.

"And I liked it too. So what's the problem?"

"The problem..." Sirius stopped, wondering himself just what he'd been worried about. "I, er, are you sure you didn't mind?"

Marlie shook her head, smiling in a disturbingly seductive manner. "Hell, no. You're good."

"Yeah. That's what worries me," said Sirius warily. This time, he'd got away with it, but what about next time? "Kitten, it mustn't happen again. I stepped over the line – not so far as to really screw things up, but far enough." He stroked her cheek tenderly. "I like what we have between us. You're sweet and friendly and you make me laugh. I don't want to lose you."

"So stop being such a weirdo then," Marlie snapped. Her expression softened. "Are we still friends?"

"Of course we are," said Sirius. Marlie, smiling contentedly, snuggled up against him, heedless of the haunted look in Sirius's eyes.

"Good. Then let's put this behind us. Come on, I've got presents to open!" With that, she proceeded to start in on the as yet untouched pile of packages at the end of her bed, leaving Sirius to curse his inability to deny her anything, and wondering where they went from here.

It took some time, but finally all Marlie's presents had been opened. Most of them appeared to consist of clothes, make-up, CDs, the odd bit of jewellery, the usual things teenagers got given. Sirius oohed and aahed in all the right places, and did a passable job of looking interested, all the while entertaining himself by using the discarded wrapping paper as an impromptu cat toy. Marlie laid down her last

present, an electronics kit from her father, and watched as Sirius scrunched up some paper and threw it at Snowy, egging the cat on as it tore into the paper.

"You know, I sometimes think you prefer that cat to me," Marlie observed.

"Never!" Sirius replied, entranced by the spectacle of cat teeth and claws savaging an innocent piece of wrapping paper. "Go on, Snowy, old son, kick its arse! You can do it, mate!" Snowy promptly ripped the paper to pieces and meowed, strutting about and pawing at the shreds, as if daring it to fight back. Sirius cheered.

"Yay! Well done, my son!" He scooped the cat up, lifting one of its paws. "Cat Nine, Wrapping Paper Nil! Victory to the Snowmeister!" He noticed Marlie muttering something suspiciously like 'oh my god'. "What? You'd have never stopped complaining if I'd hated your cat on sight and threatened to drop-kick it across the common room every five minutes! And yet when I try to bond with it, I'm the bad guy?"

"More like the stupid guy," Marlie commented, grinning.

"What?" Sirius pouted. "I'm just helping the little fella develop his hunting and killing skills! They're vital parts of being a cat!"

"Great, so he'll be bringing back even more wildlife than he already does. Lovely." Marlie rolled her eyes. "Well, if you've quite finished encouraging my cat's violent streak-"

"Encouraging it? Kitten, he needs no encouragement from me. This animal is a feline psychopath."

"Well, he probably is after spending time with you, yes. But if you're ready, I'm finished with my presents. Ready to open yours?"

Sirius put the cat down, wondering if he'd heard her right.

"Presents? For... for me?"

Marlie nodded, smiling. "That's right. For you. I bought you something, and Rianne's got you a present as well."

Sirius's shocked look turned to another expression entirely. "Oh god."

"Don't be like that," Marlie scolded as she dug Rianne's parcel out for him. "Apparently she spent a lot of time and money putting this together."

"Jesus Christ," Sirius groaned, closing his eyes. "Did she say what it was?"

"Nope. Just that it was a little light bedtime reading and something to enjoy afterwards. And that you'd love it, but I'd probably disapprove – oh god." Marlie grimaced at it distastefully. Knowing Rianne, it could be anything.

"I'll take her word for it," said Sirius, taking the box from her gingerly. Slowly, he began to unwrap it, with Snowy on hand eagerly awaiting yet another new toy to play with. Letting the paper fall to the ground, where it was immediately pounced on by the cat, he took out the contents, a tin box in Gryffindor colours... and a mid-sized black leather bound book, with silver and green trim and the Slytherin crest on the front. Sirius took one look and whooped with delight.

"Oh my god! Oh bloody hell! Rianne, you absolute star, you! I didn't even know this really existed!"

"What?" Marlie asked. "What is it? What's she bought you?"

Sirius howled with laughter "She's only gone and bought me Sex Secrets of the Slytherins! One of the most notorious sex manuals and works of erotica on the bloody planet!"

Marlie buried her head in her hands. Trust Rianne to buy him that... She'd heard of it, of course, who hadn't? It was legendary, and even most Slytherins had never seen a copy. Penned by one of Salazar Slytherin's descendants, it allegedly recorded the turn-ons and sexual kinks of every single Slytherin Sortee in its pages, names hidden of course, along with various hints, tips, and lessons learned, both good and bad. Even more famously, it was said to adapt itself to the reader, assessing their sexual likes and dislikes, and providing them with material tailor-made for their preferences. It was even said that it was so sexually charged, it had had to be charmed so that virgins (male or female) could not open it. And Rianne had bought a copy for Sirius,

who even now was flicking through it with the biggest grin Marlie had ever seen on him. Trust him to have no problems opening it.

"It's official," Sirius announced. "I love Rianne. She is wonderful. Bless her perverted little heart!" He closed the book, clutching it to his chest. "Oh kitten, this is brilliant. Absolutely brilliant." He got up, book tucked under his arm, making as if to leave. "Right, I'm off. You might see me again this Christmas. You might not. If you need me, I'll be in the bathroom."

"Sirius!" Marlie yelped, hands to her ears. "I don't want to know! And please, no, not in the bathroom. I have to wash in there! I don't want to have to think about you in there... reading! If you must read the bloody thing, do it in bed! With the curtains drawn! And soundproofed!"

"What, in Deanna's bed?" Sirius raised an eyebrow. "I don't think so, kitten."

"No, you're right, she'd end up burning it if she found out you'd been looking at porn in it," Marlie sighed. "Use Rianne's. She won't mind, I'm sure, and if she's going to buy you this stuff, she can bloody well live with the consequences."

"Alright then." Sirius sat down again and reached for the tin box. "Now is this the little something for afters?"

"Must be."

"Intriguing. Wonder what it is? It'd better be bloody impressive to top the book, I must say." Sirius prised the lid open and stared into it, before beaming. "Oh yes," he breathed. "Thank god, thank god, thank god. Rianne, bless you! I'll say this about her, she certainly knows how to go about satisfying a man's needs."

"Oh god," Marlie groaned. "It's not sex toys, is it?"

"Nope. Far better." Sirius reached in and produced a pack of cigarettes and a metal lighter with a dragon on the side. "She's bought me some fags, look!"

"Jesus Christ. Sirius, you're NOT smoking them in here!" Marlie warned him.

"Kitten..." Sirius whined.

"NO!" Marlie said firmly. "I don't care if it is Christmas, it's a disgusting habit, it makes the place smell foul, and I'm going to have enough clearing up to do without having to get rid of the fag smoke into the bargain. You want to smoke yourself into an early grave, fine, but you're not doing it anywhere I have to be."

"So, you don't want one the-"

"No I bloody well do not!"

Sirius rolled his eyes. "God, kids today. Such puritans. You don't drink, you don't smoke, anything remotely sexual freaks you out, and I dare not even ask about your attitudes to other substances. Kitten, what the hell do you do to have a good time?"

"I'll have you know we're noted for our parties!"

"With no booze or fags? Doesn't sound like my sort of party."

"Good thing you're not invited then, isn't it?" Marlie retorted, glaring at him. She folded her arms sternly. "Now behave, or I'm taking your present back to the shop."

"My present?" Sirius was suddenly cheerful, friendly and eager to please again. "You've got me a present? Cool! Where?"

"In here." Marlie reached into her cupboard again. "And I hope you're going to be properly grateful for it."

"Oh yes. Absolutely," Sirius promised. "Tell you what though, it'd better be special. After what Rianne's given me, it's got a lot to live up to."

"Oh it's special all right," Marlie said softly. She handed him the parcel. Sirius took it from her, made typically short work of the wrapping paper (leaving Marlie wondering why she'd bothered neatly wrapping it with immaculate corners) and stared down at the box within. It had been a

long time since Sirius had seen one but even he could recognise a wand box when he saw it.

"Kitten, is this..." He stared at her, unable to believe what he was seeing.

"Yeah. I mean, it was the one thing you needed above all else," said Marlie bashfully. "You're not a proper wizard without one after all."

"You never went to Ollivanders though, surely to god," said Sirius, tracing the logo on the top, a letter C emblazoned on the palm of a hand, all done in white. "In fact, this looks rather like..." He froze, staring up at her in horror. "Curunir's?"

"Yeah," Marlie admitted. "Rianne scried the address for me."

"Curunir's of Knockturn Alley?"

"Um... yeah. I needed a place that wouldn't ask too many questions..."

"You went to Knockturn Alley? For me?"

"I could hardly walk in to Ollivanders for one, could I?" said Marlie.

"Kitten," Sirius breathed, sounding more horrified by the second. "I can't believe you and Rianne went to Knockturn Alley of all places!" He stopped, noticing the guilty look on Marlie's face. "Rianne was with you, wasn't she?"

"Er... I kind of needed Rianne to distract Lu so I could slip off on my own..." Marlie confessed. She closed her eyes, not wanting to see his reaction.

"You went to Knockturn Alley ON YOUR OWN? Are you insane?" Sirius demanded. "Not even Aurors go there on their own if they can help it!"

"Where else was I meant to go?" Marlie snapped. "I could hardly walk into a legit shop and ask for a wand for Sirius Black, could I?"

Sirius shook his head, speechless, and a horrible shade of grey. "God help me, kitten, Knockturn Alley, what were you thinking? You could have been hurt, killed, robbed, worse..." He looked away, breathing

deeply. "Kitten, please, I am not worth risking your life for like that. For god's sake, don't put yourself at risk, not for my sake. I'd rather be wandless than see you hurt. Hell, I'd rather be back in Azkaban than see you hurt!"

Marlie sat back, amazed at how vehement he appeared. She knew he was protective of her, but she had no idea his concern ran that deep. "Really?"

"Yes, really. Freedom ain't worth that."

Marlie finally met his eyes again. For a few moments, nothing was said, as the two of them just stared at each other. Marlie couldn't decide whether to be scared or pleased. On the one hand, it was rather nice to have a protector, but on the other hand, the intensity she saw in his eyes couldn't help but unnerve her. She decided to change the subject.

"So, er, you going to have a look at it, then?" She indicated the box. "Or do I have to return it?"

"NO!" said Sirius fiercely. "No way are you going back there! If it's not right, tough. I'll make do."

"Oh, it'll be right," said Marlie softly. "I guarantee it."

Sirius looked sceptical but did not press the point. Instead, with hands that were noticeably shaking, he opened the box, reached in and slowly lifted the wand within, gazing at it in awe.

"Well?" Marlie asked, after the silence got to be too much for her. "What do you think?"

"I'm wanded," Sirius said, clearly still not quite able to believe that he had a wand of his own again. "I – I've got a wand. Of my own. I can do spells with it and everything." He lowered it, unable to take his eyes off it. "You know, it's the strangest thing, but it looks and feels exactly like my old one did. It's bizarre."

"Try doing some magic with it," Marlie prompted. "How long's it been since you last cast a spell with your own wand?"

"Longer than I care to remember," Sirius replied. He gave it an experimental wave before pointing it at the fire. "Extinguo!" The fire went out.

"Oh!" Sirius breathed, shaking himself, stunned at feeling a wizard's power again. He waved the wand once more. "Ignito!" The fire roared into life once more, and if anything, it was hotter, brighter and more powerful than it had been before. Sirius blinked, before staring at the wand.

"I know this wand," he said slowly. "I've used it before. It... it feels right. It feels good. It feels familiar. It's pleased, kitten, it's pleased to see me, it's missed me." He turned to stare at Marlie, shock writ large on every feature. "This is my old wand, kitten!"

"I know," said Marlie with a grin. "Mrs. Curunir thought I was there buying a wand for Deanna to use to go after you with, one that she could get rid of afterwards. So she got that one out. Apparently, a Ministry official in need of a quick cash injection swapped yours for a counterfeit wand before they snapped it, and sold that one on to her. She'd been hanging on to it for years waiting for the right customer. And she decided I was it." She noticed the strange look in Sirius's eyes as she said this. "What? What's up? Everything OK, Sirius?"

"You found my old wand," he said, his voice strained. "You tracked it down and got it back for me."

"Rianne helped," said Marlie modestly. "I wouldn't have known where to start if it hadn't been for her."

"But it was your idea, wasn't it?" said Sirius. "To get me a new wand."

"Well, yeah," said Marlie. "About time you stopped borrowing mi- oof!" Sirius had leapt off the other bed and swept her up into his arms, clutching her to his chest as if afraid she was about to disappear.

"Thank you," she heard him gasp hoarsely. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" He picked her up and physically swung her round, causing her to cling on to him, before setting her down and planting a fierce kiss on her cheek. "You are wonderful," he gasped. "You are an amazing, wonderful young woman."

"Thanks," Marlie giggled, feeling quite dizzy and rather gratified at his reaction. He released his grip a little, smiling down at her as he trailed the fingers of one hand through her hair, the expression quite at odds with the distinctive blue eyes which were shining with emotion. The giddiness began to fade, as Marlie picked up on something, an indefinable emotion that she couldn't quite explain, but that was definitely there, a charged connection that right now was buzzing so fiercely as to be almost tangible. Something is going to happen, something completely unexpected, something that will change everything... and Sirius was clearly aware of it too, a strange, hypnotic look in his eyes as he started to lean towards her, gently tilting her face up to meet his at an angle as his eyes closed and his lips parted...

And then the moment was shattered by a pounding at the door.

Sirius had spun round in an instant, wand out and ready to strike.

"Expecting visitors?" he murmured harshly. Marlie shook her head – after all, who knew the password, other than her? No one, apart from Professor Snape and presumably the Headmaster...

"Morph into Padfoot, now!" Marlie hissed. "Then get under the bed and stay out of sight, and whatever happens, stay in your dog form! Do not change back, for any reason whatsoever! Got that?"

Sirius did not look happy, but grudgingly morphed and slid under Rianne's bed. Marlie swiftly concealed his presents, drew the curtains on all the beds other than hers, hastily smoothed down her hair and went to answer the door.

Professor Snape glowered down at her.

"You took your time, Miss Lovegood."

Marlie shrugged. "I was in the middle of something."

"Indeed." Snape did not press for details, for which Marlie was infinitely grateful. "Well, Miss Lovegood, seeing as you are up and about, I will not detain you for long. I merely wished to check that you were alive and well, and that there were no problems."

"And here I am, alive and healthy," Marlie replied with a cheeriness she did not feel. "You have done your duty as Head of Slytherin and can now return to your potions and esoteric texts. Don't let me keep you!"

"Be certain I shall not," Snape replied tersely. "However, my other reason for visiting was to inform you that Christmas dinner will be served in fifteen minutes, and that the rest of the school would appreciate your presence."

"They would?" Marlie asked, heart sinking.

"Yes, Marlene, they would. You attended every single meal on the first day of holidays, and we've barely seen you since. People have been talking, and were it not for the fact that the House Elves assured me that you've been scrounging enough food from the kitchens to feed at least two people, never mind you and your cat, I would have been concerned myself. However, you appear well enough. I shall inform your Defence Against the Dark Arts professor that his fears were groundless."

Marlie perked up immediately on hearing this. "He was worried about me? Really?"

"He expressed concerns about your wellbeing," said Snape, the faintest hint of a sneer on his features. "Apparently, he was afraid the isolation would take its toll on your mental health, and that you might be in need of social interaction with other humans."

"Oh no," said Marlie brightly. "I'm quite happy. Me and Mr. Flibble the Invisible Penguin have been keeping each other entertained just fine."

Snape did not answer, merely looking at her as if to say 'keep talking, I need a little more information first before I can definitively certify you as insane'.

"Er... that was a joke, by the way," said Marlie nervously. "I'm not really talking to invisible penguins."

"No," said Snape delicately. "Of course not." He turned to go. "Well, I shall see you in the Great Hall in fifteen minutes. I would offer to escort

you down there, but," here he looked over her outfit consisting of jeans, a bright pink t-shirt with 'Sinner' emblazoned on it, a blue hooded top and a pair of bunny rabbit slippers, "you are clearly going to be some time making yourself presentable. Good day, Miss Lovegood. Oh, and Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, sir," Marlie managed, trying not to glare too much. Marlie waited until he'd turned the corner before closing the door. Of course, as soon as she'd done this, Sirius shot out from under the bed, did a commando roll and morphed back into human form again, looking more furious than she'd ever seen him.

"What the hell was he doing here!" he snarled. Marlie looked at him, wondering what on earth had got into him now.

"Er... he's my head of house. He's allowed down here."

"Head of... You mean they let him teach? Is Dumbledore out of his mind?" Sirius couldn't believe his ears. Marlie nodded.

"Yeah, he teaches Potions." It occurred to her that in order to be reacting like this, Sirius must have met Professor Snape before. "You know him?"

"Oh yes. Snivellus Snape and I, we go way back," Sirius said grimly. "We were at school together, and we didn't get on then. And afterwards, well..." He smiled humourlessly at her. "Kitten, I could tell you things about your house head that would make your skin crawl."

"I bet you could," Marlie said offhandedly. "Everyone knows Snape's into all sorts of weird magic."

"He's an utter bastard," Sirius snapped, the savagery in his voice startling even her. However, his expression softened as he turned to her. "Kitten, please be careful, won't you? I don't suppose he'd really hurt a student, especially not one in his own house, but all the same, I don't like the idea of him being around you."

"You worry too much," said Marlie, although part of her was rather flattered that he cared. "The worst he's going to do is make sarcastic comments, and believe me, I'm quite used to that."

"I'll take your word for it," said Sirius darkly. "Hey, he's not going to be making a habit of dropping in, is he? Because he's the last person I want finding me."

"Don't think so," said Marlie. "He only dropped in today because he wanted to make sure I was still alive. I'll have to start attending a few meals, visit the library every so often, make sure I'm seen out and about. Make sure he's got no reason to snoop around."

"All the same, take care," said Sirius.

"Don't I always?" Marlie purred. She went over to her chest and dug out her school robes and a decent pair of shoes. "Now I have dinner to get to. Sure you'll be alright on your own?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine." Sirius scooped Snowy up and tucked the cat under his arm. "Me and the cat'll keep ourselves amused, won't we, Snowmeister?" He shot her a lascivious look. "Besides, I've got Sex Secrets of the Slytherins to get cracking on, haven't I?"

Marlie rolled her eyes. Sirius was so predictable sometimes. Collecting her clothes to get changed, she headed off to the bathroom. She had a meal to get to, and a rendezvous with a certain amber-eyed professor...

Chapter Twenty Five

Close Encounters of the Marauder Kind

Marlie made her way swiftly towards the Great Hall, Sirius no longer occupying her thoughts for once. Her attention was currently focused on a certain Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, one she'd not even seen since term ended. In fact, with Sirius demanding her time and energy, she'd barely been able to think about him.

Well, that was about to change, Marlie promised herself. If she was honest with herself, at least part of the reason she'd stayed had been to see if she could snatch some quality time with her favourite teacher, in between entertaining fugitive Animagi, of course. Time to see if she couldn't make up for lost time. She dashed into the Great Hall, heart beating rapidly. Any second now, she'd see his eyes, see him smile at her, hear him wishing her a Merry Christmas...

She stopped dead. He was nowhere in sight. Six members of staff at a small table set for twelve, and two first years, with four empty seats. One for her, and the other three presumably for the three Gryffindors staying over. No space for Lupin.

Trying to hide her disappointment, she took the empty chair next to Professor Snape. *He knew, he must have known Lupin wasn't going to be here, and yet he led me on, letting me believe he would be. Bastard!* Glaring, she slumped into the chair, pointedly ignoring him.

"Good morning, Miss Lovegood," she heard him say, and she could tell by the tone of his voice that he was quietly laughing at her. "Glad to see you with us at last."

"Morning," said Marlie sulkily. Finally, she turned to look at him, and she was right, he was secretly laughing at her. The smirk gave it all away.

"I don't see any sign of Professor Lupin," she said, trying to sound nonchalant. "Is he not here? You said he was staying over for

Christmas..." *You also said that he'd been asking after me, that he was worried about me, you implied he'd bloody well be here! You greasy haired bastard.*

"Professor Lupin is indisposed," said Snape smoothly, bland expression concealing the sadistic gleam in his eyes that was always there whenever he was having fun at another person's expense. "Unfortunately, he is likely to be under the weather for the next few days or so, and is confined to his rooms until he recovers."

"You... didn't mention this earlier," said Marlie, bitterly cursing Snape's name.

"You did not ask," Snape replied, a smug grin playing around his mouth. "And also it is not any of your business," he added, unfolding a napkin and spreading it on his lap.

Marlie, seething, turned away. *Thanks for nothing*, sir. There went any chance of an interesting Christmas dinner. Her best hope was to eat fast and slip away early, calling in at the kitchens *en route* to get some food for Padfoot. Honestly, could things get any worse?

And then the Gryffindor Three, as Marlie had quietly dubbed them, tumbled into the room, and Marlie felt her heart sink as they poured into the seats next to her. Apparently she'd been wrong.

Dumbledore got to his feet and called for attention. "Merry Christmas!" he announced cheerily. "As there are so few of us, it seemed silly to use the house tables." He picked up a cracker, offering one end to Snape. Marlie bit her lip, trying not to smile. From the look on Snape's face, it appeared he suddenly didn't want to be here either. Still, he took the end of the cracker and half-heartedly pulled it. With a bang, it flew apart, revealing a witch's hat with a stuffed vulture on top.

Marlie immediately dropped her eyes, staring fixedly at her plate. If she looked anyone else in the eye now, anyone at all, she'd burst out laughing, and you didn't need the Sight to know that Snape would not thank her for that at all. Fortunately, Snape just thrust the hat at

Dumbledore with a growl, the scowl on his face matching her own. Marlie allowed herself a quietly smug smile. *You so deserved that one, Professor.*

A small voice on Marlie's other side coughed. "Did you want me to pull yours with you, Marlie?" It was Hermione, who had seated herself next to the Slytherin, presumably in need of some female company after five days spent cooped up with two Gryffindor males. For once, Marlie knew exactly how she felt. Admittedly, Sirius was only one Gryffindor male, but he made up for it with sheer force of personality.

"Go on then. My only other option's Snape, and to be honest, I don't think he's really in the mood at the moment." The two girls shared a conspiratorial grin, before taking hold of one end of the cracker each and pulling. Once the smoke had cleared, Marlie examined the contents. The cracker contained a glittering tiara, which Marlie wasted no time putting on, a joke on a bit of parchment... and a cuddly toy in the form of a shaggy black dog.

"Oh, it's so cute!" Hermione breathed, scratching it behind the ears. The dog yapped and bounced up and down. "Oh, and it's charmed to move as well! You lucky thing!"

"You ain't seen the joke," said Marlie, reading the parchment. "*What's orange and sounds like a parrot? A carrot.* I mean, bloody hell, who writes this crap?" She screwed up the parchment, and cast a Disintegrating Hex on it. "Rubbish." She looked at the toy dog, which looked alarmingly like Sirius. "But the dog is rather sweet." She placed it to one side, before a noise from the door distracted her. She blinked at the figure who drifted in. It was Professor Trelawney, dressed up to the nines in a green, glittering dress.

"What the hell?" Marlie heard Hermione whisper on one side, at the same time as she heard Snape mutter "Oh my god," on the other.

"Sybill," Dumbledore cried. "This is a pleasant surprise!"

"I have been crystal-gazing, Headmaster," said Trelawney in her usual faraway tones, "and to my astonishment, I saw myself abandoning my solitary luncheon and coming to join you. Who am I to refuse the promptings of fate?"

"Dear god, Marlene, she's as bad as you," Snape murmured to Marlie with a smile.

"What do you mean?" Marlie asked, confused.

"Well, not being gifted with the Sight, I may be wrong, but I do believe she was prompted by the same reason you were; the presence of a certain Defence professor."

"What, you mean Professor Lupin?" Marlie turned to stare at Trelawney, eyes narrowing.

"Precisely."

"But he's not here, he's ill, surely she would have seen..." She noticed the look on Snape's face. "Oh, right." Jealousy turned into smug superiority. "Sucks to be her, eh? Sight on the blink, and no Professor Lupin. Dear oh dear."

"Indeed," Snape murmured. "As long as she does not sit near us, this is going to be a very interesting meal." Snape's smile increased even more as Dumbledore conjured a chair between Professors Sprout and McGonagall. "Oh yes. Very interesting indeed."

Snape was not wrong. What with Trelawney's mystical babbling, and Professor McGonagall's tart ripostes, Marlie was kept well entertained throughout and on several occasions had to look away and fake a coughing fit to avoid laughing. Next to her, she could tell Hermione was enjoying herself too.

"She's good, isn't she?" Hermione whispered to Marlie.

"Who, McGonagall?" Marlie asked.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Yeah, of course. You think I take Professor Trelawney seriously?"

"You?" Marlie had to smile at the thought of someone as level-headed and reasonable as Hermione looking up to Trelawney. "Never. Trelawney makes my cousin Luna look normal."

Hermione frowned. "I don't think I know your cousin Luna. What house is she in?"

"Ravenclaw. And count yourself very, very lucky."

Hermione wisely chose not to pursue the topic, deciding that someone who could be compared to Trelawney was not someone she really wanted to spend too much time dwelling on. Instead, she decided to sound out Marlie on what had been troubling her all morning.

"Marlie, listen, can we talk?" Hermione whispered, lowering her voice and glancing at Ron, who was too busy chatting to Harry about Quidditch to listen.

Marlie glanced at Snape, who was occupied spearing a roast potato and alternately glaring at Dumbledore's hat and sneering at Trelawney. "Go on then."

Hermione glanced around and leaned closer to Marlie. "Harry... Harry got sent a broom this morning. A really fast, expensive broom. And we don't know who it's from. There's no label or anything."

"Lucky him," Marlie commented, trying to sound neutral. Then she remembered she was on the rival team. "Lucky him," she muttered, glaring.

"No," Hermione whispered, betraying her inner fears. "Not lucky at all! Marlie, I think it's from him! You know, Black! I think he's hexed it so it'll throw Harry off and kill him when he tries to ride it!"

Marlie carefully schooled herself not to react to this. Why, why, did Hermione have to think like this? The broom was in fact perfectly safe

and Sirius hadn't even seen it, but how to tell Hermione that without giving them both away? The best she could do was at least try and talk her round.

"Hmm. Could be... but to be honest, I think you're worrying over nothing."

"Nothing??" Hermione hissed. "Marlie, Harry could die! Sirius Black would stop at nothing to get his hands on him, you know that!"

Which was true, but not for the reasons Hermione supposed. Sirius was in fact most anxious to get to meet Harry, but only so the boy could finally get to know his adoring godfather.

"Exactly, Hermione. Exactly. He wants to get his *hands* on Harry. He doesn't want to kill him from a distance. Not his style. When Sirius Black wants someone dead, he likes to do it personally. Much more satisfying that way. He wouldn't send Harry a hexed broom. Not Sirius."

And the best part was, every word was true. If a little misleading.

"Sirius?" said Hermione curiously. "Since when have you been on first name terms with him?"

Oh. Bugger. That was all she needed, to slip up in front of one of the most observant people in the school.

"Mum still calls him that sometimes," Marlie said carelessly, hoping her slip wasn't too major. "Must have picked it up off her. She used to know him quite well, you know."

"Not well enough, obviously," said Hermione pointedly. She sighed. "Oh bloody hell, I don't know. I don't want to spoil Harry's fun, but it's his life at risk here! You try telling him that though. Honestly, *boys!*"

"Couldn't agree more," Marlie replied diplomatically, thinking of Sirius, another one given to plunging in first and thinking it over later, if at all. "You know, I sometimes think life would be a lot more straightforward if men would occasionally *think*."

Marlie, however, was not fated for a straightforward existence, no matter what happened to the men in her life. Indeed, at least half the time, it was her own decisions that got her in trouble. Such as the one she made after dinner to go and drop in on Lupin. A visit to the hospital wing proved fruitless, and her newly enhanced senses told her that he wasn't there in any case. So she tried his office.

A knock on the door went unanswered. Well, that was to be expected. He was ill, after all. She tried again though, just to be sure.

"Hello? Professor Lupin? Are you there? It's me, Marlie."

Still nothing. She was on the verge of leaving, when extra sensitive hearing picked up a noise. It was the sound of something heavy falling to the floor, followed by the sound of something tapping against stone. It sounded oddly like Sirius leaping off the bed or sofa in his dog form and padding over, claws tapping against the ground... but Professor Lupin didn't have a dog, surely?

"Professor?" she called out. "Is that you?"

Still no answer, although she could hear scuffling. Frowning, Marlie intensified her sense of smell. He was there all right; she could smell him quite strongly. However, there was something odd about him, something off. She could smell another scent intertwined with his, a feral aroma that once more reminded her of Sirius... except there was something about it that was far darker, far less controlled than Sirius ever was. Marlie felt the hair on the back of her neck start rising. Something was very wrong here.

"Professor..." she whispered, wondering what to do. She should really fetch a teacher... but Snape was the only one who sprang to mind as an obvious candidate, and he was well known to dislike Lupin intensely. Besides, even in cat form, it would take her a good five minutes to find Snape, and then she'd have to convince him to come with her and bring him back. In the mean time, Lupin could be dying for all she knew.

Taking a deep breath, she made her mind up. Producing her wand, she cast an Unlocking Charm on the door.

To her surprise, it swung open at once. It must have been cast in haste, presumably to allow staff members to get in to tend to Lupin in an emergency. He must be ill, if he couldn't even deal with his own wards. Wand in hand, she stepped inside.

And came face to face with a full-grown wolf. Marlie froze, stunned. Whatever she'd expected, it had not been coming face to face with a dangerous wild animal. It was standing in front of her, its head nearly level with her waist, staring at her with wide eyes. As yet, it seemed too surprised by her sudden entrance to do anything, but Marlie had no illusions of that lasting for long. She remembered the three-headed dog from third year all too well. She slowly looked up, hoping to see Professor Lupin somewhere - she could smell him, but where was he? She couldn't hear anyone other than the wolf. Then she noticed the door at the other end of the room, swinging on its hinges, clearly leading through into Professor Lupin's private quarters. Behind the door, she could see a double four-poster bed, looking like some wild beast had been at the bed covers. Ever so slowly, her eyes drifted back to the wild beast in front of her... and her mind jumped to conclusions. Panicking, she began to scream.

This was enough to shock the wolf into action. Yelping, it ran towards her, looking equally panic-stricken. Marlie, in her own fright, completely failed to notice this little detail, and ran for the door, darting into the corridor before the wolf could reach her. Gasping for breath, she forced the door shut as the wolf tried to follow her out, bruising its nose in the process. The wolf fell back, whining. Marlie reached for her wand and gasped out the charm to secure the door again, before stepping back, reality sinking in.

"Oh god!" she whispered to herself. Turning away, she stumbled down the corridor... straight into Professor Snape, who immediately grabbed her by the shoulders and hauled her to her feet.

"Marlene!" he snapped, with something almost like concern in his eyes. "I heard screaming - are you alright? Are you hurt?"

Marlie shook her head, still too upset to really process this. "N-no, I'm, I'm OK," she breathed, before remembering what she'd been running from. "Professor Lupin..." She put her hand to her mouth, fighting tears. "Sir, a wolf's eaten Professor Lupin!"

Silence followed this outburst. Hesitantly, Marlie looked up, only to see that, far from being upset, or even shocked, he was actually smiling.

"It's not funny!" she shouted. Far from stopping him smiling, it only made matters worse. Snape actually started to laugh.

"Stop it!" Marlie shrieked. "Professor Lupin's been killed, how can you just stand there and *laugh??*"

"Oh god," Snape breathed, wiping his eyes. "You're right, it's not funny, I - oh god, Marlene, you will be the death of me one of these days." Straightening up, he motioned for her to follow him. "Marlene, while your concern is touching, it is wholly unnecessary. Professor Lupin is perfectly fine, or at least he was. Did you do anything to the wolf?"

"I think I hurt its nose when I slammed the door on it," Marlie faltered, now completely confused. Snape just nodded.

"Easily healed." He studied her carefully, seemingly weighing up what to do next. Finally, he shrugged. "Well, you have seen this much, I may as well tell you all. However, before I do, I want to make it very clear that what I am about to tell you is to be discussed with no one other than Professor Lupin or myself. Not your friends, not your family, no one. Understand?"

"OK," Marlie whispered, not fully understanding at all, but prepared to do what it took to get to the bottom of this. Professor Lupin was clearly not dead, which was the main thing. In fact, come to think of it, there would have been blood, surely, if Professor Lupin had been killed by a wolf, and she'd not smelt anything of the sort in the room...

Snape opened the door with a few words, and watched with a grin as the wolf emerged, looking small and pathetic and not nearly as frightening as Marlie remembered. Blood was dripping from its nostril, and it was whining from the pain, trying to nuzzle against Snape.

"No, not my robes!" Snape snapped irritably at it. "Damn wolf, stop bleeding over me!" Still grumbling, he reached for his wand and cast a few quick healing charms to fix the damage, before ushering the wolf back inside. "There, you're healed. Now stop whining and get inside before anyone else sees you."

Funnily enough, the wolf seemed to understand every word, because it dived back into the office at once. Snape turned back to Marlie.

"Well? Are you joining us?"

Speechless, Marlie nodded and followed him in.

Closing the door behind her, Marlie sat down next to the desk. Snape was occupying Lupin's chair like he belonged there, especially with the wolf at his feet, cutting a rather pitiful figure. It was gazing mournfully at Marlie, head leaning against Snape's knees. Marlie wondered why she'd ever been afraid of it. It looked no more dangerous than Padfoot; although, her wiser half reminded her, Sirius was by no means as harmless as he looked. However, the wolf didn't look threatening at the moment. Snape was actually scratching it behind the ears almost affectionately.

"So, Professor Lupin is all right, then?" she asked hesitantly.

"As well as can be expected," came the reply. Snape noticed the concern on her face and sighed. "He will be fine in a day or two. You do not need to worry about him."

"OK." Marlie glanced towards the door to his bedroom, still partly open. "So, er, where is he then?"

Snape patted the wolf on the back, ruffling its fur. "You're looking at him."

Marlie stared at the wolf. *That* was Professor Lupin? Well, that would explain everything. She felt her heart sink. Not only had she invaded his privacy and run screaming from him, she'd slammed a door on him and hurt him in the bargain. How was she meant to face him when he turned back?

"Is he a wolf Animagus?" she asked, that being the first thing that sprang to mind. However, even as she said the words, her brain was thinking, no, not possible, he would have changed into human on seeing me if he was, besides he doesn't smell right... "But he would have to be stuck somehow, or he'd have turned back when he saw me. Is he under a curse or geas or something?"

"In a manner of speaking." Snape hesitated, the fingers that had been fondling Lupin's fur halting their movement. "Well, Lupin? Should I tell her or Obliviate?"

The wolf's sad eyes turned from Marlie to Snape, then back to Marlie. It stared at her for a long while, before turning back to Snape and nodding once.

"Is that a yes, I should tell her? Bark once if it is."

Lupin barked once. As soon as he'd done so, he seemed to shrink, cowering away and edging closer to Snape. Snape patted the wolf's neck as if to reassure it, and turned back to Marlie.

"Marlene, Professor Lupin is a werewolf."

Werewolf. Strange how one simple word could change everything so abruptly. Marlie sat there, frozen in shock, her mind lost in tales of werewolves savaging innocents, killing any human that crossed their path, and worst of all for a family as rationalist as hers, turning others, attacking but leaving you alive, and making you one of them, doomed to lose your reason every month and become a monster yourself.

Werewolves - about the only thing she'd ever seen her mother really frightened of. Even Sirius Black's escape had made her mother more annoyed than anything else, but every full moon, she'd been nearly obsessive about making sure everyone was in by dark and didn't go out again unless by Floo. Werewolves were bad news. And Professor Lupin was one? Sweet, kind, goodnatured Professor Lupin? Not possible. Not possible! Marlie fought to keep the rising feeling of revulsion from overwhelming her - and then another memory came to mind, of Sirius frowning and telling her "Werewolves are people too, you know!"

Werewolves are people too. Slowly, she began to calm down, staring at the wolf, reminding herself that it was still Professor Lupin in there. Still Professor Lupin ... and he looked safe enough. Right now, he'd buried his face in Snape's robes and was whimpering. *Poor thing, he sounds so lonely.* With a jolt, she realised that Lupin was not only in that wolf's body, he could understand every word that was going on. And with a wolf's heightened senses to boot, he'd also be very good at reading her physical responses and emotions.

Oh god, he must think I hate him. Which wasn't true, she didn't hate him, couldn't hate him, only what he was... and when she thought about it, not even that. It wasn't his fault, after all.

"Is it safe?" she asked. Well it must be, surely, Snape wouldn't get that close to a werewolf if he didn't think it was safe, would he?

"Perfectly. Professor Lupin is under the influence of a powerful potion, one I aided in the development of by the way, which renders him harmless. He still transforms into a wolf, but he keeps his human mind for the duration. As long as his saliva does not come in contact with your bloodstream, you are quite safe."

"Sure?" asked Marlie, still slightly nervous.

"Of course I'm sure," Snape snapped tersely at her. "Do you doubt the abilities of not only myself but the entire Miskatonic University Lycanthropy Research Unit?"

Marlie smiled at that. No one doubted Professor Snape's expertise in Potions. "No, sir." She got up and approached the still hiding werewolf. "Can I touch him?"

Professor Snape shrugged. "If you must."

Marlie reached for the werewolf's fur and began to stroke him. "Ssh, it's alright," she whispered. "It's OK, I won't hurt you." The wolf peeked out at her, still looking rather fearful. Marlie smiled nervously at him.

"Professor? Can you hear me? I mean, do you understand?" There was a human mind inside there after all, and it was Professor Lupin's mind at that. Marlie tried to ignore the part of her that was all too happy to take the chance to get in some legitimate physical contact with him.

Lupin turned to face her fully, although he was still not meeting her eyes. It was a gesture Marlie recognised instantly as a sign of submission - Sirius sometimes used it when he was trying to get in her good books. She gave him an encouraging smile.

"It's OK. Don't be afraid. I don't mind, you know. I mean, I was a bit shocked at first, who wouldn't be, but if Professor Snape says you're not dangerous, then I don't have any problems with it. I mean, I'm not going to treat you any differently. And I promise not to tell anyone else."

Lupin blinked, and edged a little nearer, the fear receding. He now looked almost hopeful, an expression she'd seen on Padfoot many times. Her heart went out to him.

"Ohh, you're so sweet!" she breathed. Impulsively, she reached out and hugged the wolf, resting her head against him, running her hands through his fur. Lupin's fear seemed to melt away as she did this, muscles visibly relaxing as he leaned into her, letting out a soft bark. Marlie felt her heart melt as she held him. *He likes this. He really does. Poor Professor Lupin, this must be the first time anyone's ever shown him any affection while he's like this.* She certainly couldn't imagine Professor Snape doing this to him. She watched as Lupin lowered his

body to the ground and rolled over, clearly wanting his stomach tickled. Marlie obliged, laughing as she did so, wishing she had the opportunity to do this sort of thing more often. Odd really that she never played like this with Padfoot - somehow it just didn't feel right treating Padfoot like an ordinary dog. However, with Lupin, it seemed different somehow, mainly because he was stuck that way, and definitely different to his human form, werewolf control potion notwithstanding. And so she fussed over the grateful werewolf, completely oblivious to the troubled look in Snape's eyes.

"So how long's he been a werewolf then?" Marlie asked, as Snape walked her back to the common room. "Is this a new thing, or...?"

"Most of his life," said Snape, his voice hollow. "He was already turned when he began school."

"Poor thing," said Marlie softly. "To go through that every month, for nearly your whole life, all on your own."

"Don't feel sorry for him!" Snape snapped, turning on her. "While his condition is to be regretted, I'm sure, he is more than used to it by now!" Noticing the surprise on Marlie's face, he softened a little... but only a little.

"Listen, Marlene, he does not need your pity, or your sympathy. While I am sure he is grateful that you haven't turned from him in disgust, this does not mean that your relationship with him is to change in any way. He is still your Defence teacher, you are still his student, and if I find that either of you are acting in a manner inconsistent with that relationship, there will be *consequences*. In short, you are to keep your mouth shut, and *act as if nothing has changed*. Do you understand me, Marlene?"

"Yes sir," said Marlie quietly, wisely choosing to rein in the sarcasm for once. As they reached Snape's quarters, however, Marlie turned before leaving. "Sir?"

"Yes?"

"Will he really be OK?"

"He will be fine," Snape replied, the earlier menace fading. "Because of the potion's effects, he'll remain as a wolf for tonight, and all of tomorrow, before changing back on the morning of the 27th. He will no doubt be tired and uncomfortable afterwards, but I shall be on hand to assist. You do not need to worry, we have dealt with this before."

"Yeah, suppose," said Marlie softly. "Bye, sir." Turning away, she made for the common room. Sirius would be amazed to hear about this...

The other canine male in her life proved to be lying in front of the common room fire in his dog form, staring vacantly into the flames and looking tired and old before his time. At least until Marlie stepped in, closing the door behind her. Then the dog in question looked up, barked, and bounded towards her with its tail wagging furiously, before leaping on to its hind legs and pinning her to the wall. It barked again, and licked her face, watching with undisguised amusement as she grimaced in disgust.

"Sirius! Don't lick me! God, you're so gross!"

The dog barked again, before morphing back into Sirius, who was grinning at her in a way that was part smirking at her discomfort, and part appealing puppy eyes.

"Don't be like that, kitten," Sirius whined. "I missed you! I've been so bored!" Dropping the smirk, he went into full on pouting, lowering his forehead to touch hers as he started to stroke her hair. "Where were you, kitten? You were ages!"

"It wasn't that long," said Marlie irritably. Truth be told, the close proximity was making her feel a little uncomfortable. Was he always this intense with everyone or was it just her? Whatever, this

possessiveness could easily get annoying. "Here." She reached for her bag. "I got you some food."

The distraction worked.

"Food! Woohoo!" Sirius hugged her and kissed her on the cheek, before sitting down at one of the tables, looking as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. Rolling her eyes, Marlie conjured a plate and cutlery for him, before arranging the meal she'd collected from the kitchen before dropping in on Lupin.

Sirius stared greedily at the food, before tucking in. Marlie watched as she always did, in a mixture of revulsion and fascination. Table manners were not Sirius Black's strong point.

Finally, Sirius was finished. Marlie made the washing up disappear, before pouring them a glass of apple juice each from Slytherin's soft drinks cabinet, and transferring herself to a bean bag. Sirius joined her, draping himself on one of the sofas.

"So where were you then?" he asked curiously. "You were gone nearly three hours. Christmas dinner never went on that long in my day."

"Oh, you know," said Marlie. "This and that. I went to see my Defence teacher afterwards, seeing as he wasn't at dinner."

"Oh yeah, I know," Sirius grinned. "The one you fancy." The implications of Snape's earlier words to Marlie just before she'd left for dinner had not been lost on him.

"I don't fan-" Marlie started to protest, at least until the image of Professor Lupin's brilliant amber eyes came to mind. "Well, maybe I do a bit," she admitted, blushing. This time it was Sirius's turn to roll his eyes.

"Bloody hell, teenagers. He's probably my age, you know?"

Marlie shifted uncomfortably. "So? He's still cute. And he's really smart and mature too." The unspoken words *not like some* hung in the air between them.

"He's too old for you," said Sirius, determined not to let the implied rebuke get to him. "And a teacher. Trust me, kitten, nothing good could come out of this. Lust after him in private if you want, but don't kid yourself, mate. He's not boyfriend material. Men my age generally aren't." He fell silent at this, knowing all too well how true this was.

"But we get on really well," said Marlie, unwilling to let the idea drop so easily. "It's like he understands everything about me!"

"That's not love, that's just creepy," said Sirius, now scowling. "Besides, you and I get on really well - does that mean we should get together?" He phrased it as a rhetorical question, although in reality it was only half that, if at all.

Marlie grimaced again. "Ew, no."

Sirius closed his eyes and took a gulp of apple juice to disguise the involuntary wince. Well, he knew she'd likely respond that way - he just hadn't expected it hurt so much when she did.

"And what, then, is the difference between him and me?" He sat up, facing her dead on, anger coiling in his heart now, very interested to hear the answer to this one. "Why is one thirty something male who's old enough to be your father and completely unsuitable considered to be sex on legs and the other one utterly revolting? Hmm?"

"I didn't say you were utterly revolting!" Marlie protested, slightly unnerved by the tone this conversation had taken. "You're not! I like you! It's just I don't really see you as, you know, sexy."

Sirius's eyes had gone into full-on glaring.

"I don't mean it like that!" Marlie cried, flustered. "You and I, we're friends! Good friends! I don't want to think about good friends having sex, or being interested in sex, it feels wrong."

"Rianne's interested in sex," Sirius pointed out.

"Yes, and I don't really want to hear the details of that either," said Marlie, looking faintly disgusted. Sirius stared at her... before starting to laugh.

"What?" asked Marlie, confused. "What's so funny?"

"You," laughed Sirius bitterly. "You see me as one of the girls, don't you?"

"What are you on about, of course you're not a girl," said Marlie, now completely baffled. Sirius shook his head.

"No. You don't see me as a man. To you, I'm just like another one of your girl friends, except I don't wear dresses or girly things, and I don't have any tits."

Neither does Deanna, Marlie thought, but decided not to say it out loud.

Sirius shook his head wearily. "Bloody hell, it's a good thing Moony and Prongsy can't see me now. Look at me, Sirius Black, heroic fighter, bad boy, rebel, ladies' man, bloke about town, and what happens? I've got teenage girls thinking I have no bollocks. Bloody typical, really. Prongsy'd never let me hear the end of it if he found out."

"Harry's dad and the werewolf," said Marlie, reminding herself what the names stood for.

"That's them. One's dead, and the other's god knows where. Probably for the best, really, I wouldn't want them seeing me like this," Sirius growled, feeling the self-pity sink in. He stared into space, brooding.

Marlie, however, found herself pondering this - the fact that Sirius had known a werewolf once. Been very good friends with him too. He must

know plenty about them. At the very least, he'd be more sympathetic towards Professor Lupin if he knew, surely?

"Professor Lupin's a werewolf."

Sirius let out a bark of laughter. "Is he really? Well, that's just the icing on the cake, isn't it? He's twice your age, one of your teachers, AND he's a werewolf! Wonderful! Just the sort of bloke you can take home to meet your parents." Sirius scowled into his glass, before something she'd said sank into his brain and set the mental cogs whirring. "Hang on. What did you say his name was?"

"Professor Lupin," said Marlie. "Why?" Sirius had finished his drink very quickly, and was sitting bolt upright, every muscle on edge.

"Lupin," said Sirius very slowly. "On the short side of medium, light-brown hair which looks sort of red in a certain light, blond-ish bits in his side-burns, amber eyes? Always polite and friendly, soothing manner, never ever gets annoyed?"

"That's right!" Marlie confirmed. "Apart from the blond bits in his side-burns. He's got grey bits though."

Well, that went without saying. Age took its toll on them all, and werewolves aged faster than most due to the strain of the change. Sirius felt a cold knot settle into his stomach as intuition edged towards certainty.

"Remus Lupin."

"Yeah, that's him," said Marlie, feeling her own insides start to churn. "You know him?"

Sirius nodded, horror writ large on his face. "*Moony*."

"Moony." Marlie's own face fell as she realised the potential significance of all this. "Your old friend, Moony. Is... Professor Lupin."

"Yeah," Sirius whispered. He was off the sofa in a second, looking her over. "Kitten, this may sound like a really personal question, but what are you wearing under there?" He fingered her robes anxiously.

"What do you mean, what am I wearing?" Marlie demanded "Why do you want to know?"

"Just tell me!" Sirius snapped, and for a moment, Marlie felt a stab of real fear go through her. She'd not seen him like this for ages. He was like how he'd been after he'd first escaped, and that was not good. Fortunately, he seemed to realise he'd gone too far, because he stepped away immediately. "Please," he added.

"Same outfit I was wearing earlier," Marlie said, wondering what this had to do with anything. "My jeans, t-shirt and hoodie. Why?"

"The same outfit I cuddled you in this morning," Sirius whispered, all the emotion draining out of his face. Trembling, he collapsed on to the sofa. "Kitten, do you have an almanac anywhere? Or an ephemeris? I need to know what phase of the moon it is."

"Oh, that? It's Full Moon. That's how I discovered he was a werewolf, I went to his office and he was there, transformed."

"WHAT??" Sirius's head snapped upwards at once. If she'd thought he'd looked frightened before, that was nothing compared to how he looked now. "Oh god. But you were in your cat form, right? Right??"

Marlie slowly shook her head. "Um... no."

Sirius stared at her for a full second, before launching himself off the sofa and snatching her up into his arms. "Jesus Christ, kitten," he gasped. He released her a little, looking her over. "Are you alright? Are you hurt? Did he attack you? God, kitten, *are you alright?*"

"Sirius," Marlie said softly, stroking his hair in an attempt to calm him down, not easy when her own heart was thudding as fast as his. "I'm fine. I'm alright. He didn't attack me. Professor Snape was there -

apparently Professor Lupin takes this potion that means he keeps his own mind when he changes. He was about as dangerous as you are in your dog form."

Sirius was not consoled by this at all. He gave a hollow laugh, stroking her cheek. "Little kitten, I'm as dangerous as any werewolf when I want to be. You're only safe because I care about you." He tightened his grip, pressing her head to his chest. "Kitten, you will be the death of me, one of these days."

"Funny," Marlie giggled despite the seriousness of the situation. "That's what Professor Snape said to me earlier."

"At least I'm not the only one who you're driving up the wall," said Sirius, his voice ragged. "Hang on, you said he was with Lupin. Doing what?"

"Keeping an eye on him. It's his potion that keeps Lupin safe when he changes. Apparently he supervises the changes himself to make sure everything's OK."

"I see," said Sirius. "So the two of them get on then, do they?"

"I'm not sure," said Marlie, frowning. "Whenever they meet in human form, Lupin's friendly enough, but Snape's always glaring at him. And yet today, Snape was actually being... nice to him. He actually stroked the wolf, you know?"

"Stroked the-" Sirius froze. "Oh god. Oh god, kitten. That's not good."

"Not good how?" asked Marlie, although she was sure she didn't want to know the answer.

"Snape and Moony, if they're getting on with each other," Sirius breathed. "Oh god, kitten, he's in his wolf form, he can smell as well as we can if not better, and he knows my scent like his own. And you were there, and you were wearing *clothes that smell of me*, and he was in his right mind, he'll have recognised the smell, he'll know you've been in contact with me, and if he and Snape are friends again, he'll

tell him as soon as he's human, and then they'll come for us, and he *knows*, kitten, *he knows about Padfoot*, once that gets out, that's it, the game's up, I won't be able to hide any more, they'll find me, they'll send me back to Azkaban, I don't want to go back to Azkaban, I don't want to go back to Azkaban, *I don't want to go back!*" His voice had risen in pitch until it became a scream, and he was shaking as if in a fever, his skin cold and clammy and his face paler than Marlie had seen it for a long time. "I don't want to go back, don't let them take me back there!" he gasped, clutching at Marlie in terror.

"It's alright," Marlie whispered, holding on to him, trying to fight her own fears for him. "I won't let them take you back without a fight." She glanced around, frantically wondering what to do. Hysterical thirty something men weren't something she had a lot of experience with. Her eyes fell on the couch - maybe if she could get him sitting down it might help. "Come on, come with me," she murmured soothingly, leading him over to it. Surprisingly, Sirius followed without resisting, although he was still shaking. Marlie sat down at one end, motioning for Sirius to sit next to her.

Gingerly, he settled down on the couch, staring at his hands. *I can't stop shaking. Look at me, what's wrong with me? Am I going mad?* Not that it would surprise him if he was - but he had never suffered this panicky feeling in Azkaban itself, just the long, slow death of the soul, watching his life tick slowly away with only the knowledge he was innocent to keep him from giving in. But then again, he'd had six months of freedom since then, and although times had been hard, they weren't dissimilar to his traveller childhood. His body had starved, but his mind had been free, and there'd been an exhilarating thrill to it all. Then Marlie had come along, listened, treated him like a human being, held out her hand and freely offered to help, and he'd felt not just alive again, but human again. Every moment he'd been with her had reminded him he was a man, not an animal. Every conversation he'd had with her had helped piece his mind back together again, helped him remember who he was, who he had been, who he could be. He'd come to rely on her, need her for far more than just practical things. Yes, the food and clothes had been nice, but it had been her presence he'd craved most of all. He was no introvert, and he needed company

like he needed air. To lose it all again... no, he didn't think he could bear it.

Marlie was smiling encouragingly at him, beckoning him towards her, leaning back into the corner of the couch as she opened her arms for him. Sirius looked at her nervously. *Kitten, is this wise? If you only knew how you looked from here, you'd think twice, I promise you.* And yet part of him, most of him in fact, yearned to fall into her arms, curl up in her embrace, feel safe, feel warm, feel protected. Feel human. Feel like a man. Feel like Azkaban was a distant memory. He wanted it so much, needed it in fact. But something was stopping him, the fear that once he was in her arms, he'd never be able to let her go...

"It's OK," said Marlie gently. "Come on, come to me. I'll look after you. You'll be alright, I'll protect you. I promise."

Sirius felt his throat tighten. *Yes, I'm yours, just hold me...*

"Promise?" he whispered, his voice sounding like that of a small child.

Marlie nodded, feeling her throat constrict and her heart reaching out to him. *I want to make you feel better, I want to take your pain away, oh Sirius, come to me.*

Sirius nodded dumbly, and did just that, crawling into her arms like a child to its mother, resting his head against her chest, left arm sliding around her to snake around her back, while his right arm settled on her stomach, right hand resting on her waist. Sirius sighed and closed his eyes, the tension seeming to seep out of him. *Safe. Loved. Human.* The panic faded away, and while the all too real fear that he might be going back to Azkaban still remained, the paralysing terror had subsided.

Marlie, relieved, wrapped her own arms around him, one around his shoulders, the other holding the back of his head and stroking his hair.

"Hush, Padfoot, you're safe now," Marlie whispered. "I've got you. It'll be alright, I'll keep you safe, I don't care what it takes."

"He'll remember, kitten," Sirius said, his voice hoarse still. "If he had his human mind, he'll know that scent, and remember when he comes round."

"Not necessarily," said Marlie, running fingers through his hair, soft and silky to the touch. "We don't know exactly how that potion works. It might impair his memories of the change."

"It might not."

"Then I'll find Professor Snape and ask him under the guise of scientific curiosity. He's an intellectual, and it's his field, and what's more, he helped develop that potion. He'll talk," said Marlie, her earlier emotion disappearing as a feeling of cold anger began to settle on her, an icy fury that Sirius should be in danger like this, underwritten by a steely determination that she would indeed do whatever it took to protect him. Screw rules, screw laws, and definitely screw morals. *I will take this fear away from you, Padfoot. I will not let anyone hurt you. I swear it.* The realisation that she meant every word sent a chill down her spine. She'd never cared about anyone like this before, and truth be told, it scared her. And yet, he needed her. He was in danger. So she channelled fear into anger and exhilaration, letting cool rationality guide her, intellect and cunning mingling like a true child of the Lovegoods and Harkers.

"And if it doesn't? Or if he's wrong, or simply doesn't know?"

"Then I'll do my own research in the library," said Marlie softly. "And on the morning of the 27th, I will change into my cat form and be there when Professor Lupin changes back. Snape will be there too. If Lupin tells Snape, it will be then, he won't want to waste any more time. If he does, well, I'll just have to Oblivate them both. If he doesn't, I'll visit Lupin alone later on as a human and do some interrogation, find out what he does remember. And if it turns out he knows, then I'll Oblivate him. If not, then we're safe. We'll just have to be very, very careful, that's all." She stroked his hair tenderly, smiling down at him. "I will not let them get you, Sirius. That I swear." *Whatever it takes, Sirius. I promised I'd see you cleared, and I'll do it. Whatever it takes.* She

squeezed him tight, feeling very affectionate all of a sudden, and kissed the top of his head. It felt rather nice, having a warm body curled up in her arms. Especially when it was Sirius. He was normally so fiery and impetuous, so, well, male. She hardly ever saw him with his guard down like this, so open, so vulnerable. This was the most intimate the two of them had ever been... and the most intimate she'd ever been with a man of any kind. The thought frightened her a little... but it pleased her even more to know there was a side of Sirius Black kept only for her. That Sirius Black, the powerful and dangerous ex-Auror, Animagus, convict, feared up and down the country, was now lying in her arms, completely submissive and trusting.

Sirius shivered at her touch, looking up at her strangely as she leaned back. *Bloody hell. I think I've corrupted her.* Either that, or the Harker genes were coming through.

"Would you really do all that for me?"

Marlie nodded. "Yeah."

"Even though it involves lying, cheating, deceiving your teachers, sneaking around and the unethical use of magic on said teachers that could quite well get you expelled if you get caught?" *Kitten, this isn't your problem, you shouldn't be this involved...*

"Yeah," said Marlie, smiling through heavy-lidded eyes. She scratched the back of his neck idly, a gesture she'd used with Padfoot before now and that he'd always seemed to like. Turned out the human didn't mind either, for Sirius growled a little and rubbed his head against her hand, eyes closed in pleasure.

Mmm, yes, like that! Just like that, kitten! Damn, you're good. Oh well, if you've already become thoroughly corrupted, may as well enjoy it...

Reaching around, he took hold of the hand that was scratching him and drew it in front of him, squeezing it gently and rubbing her fingers. Then, before she could say anything, Sirius placed the gentlest of kisses on her fingertips before looking up, eyes meeting hers.

It's going to be all right. It really is. We'll survive this, we'll manage. We'll do what we have to, but we'll manage. You and me together, kitten, we can do anything we put our minds to. You and me, kitten. You, beautiful, sexy, smart, fiendishly evil Marlene. We can do this. We really, really can.

The fear and tension had all but gone from him now. And then Sirius smiled at her, and Marlie became in grave danger of forgetting her own name, never mind his.

Good god, Sirius, when did you become attractive?? Well, alright, he'd been attractive since he'd stepped out of the shower and into clean clothes in that Muggle house they'd broken into. But he'd never done *this* to her before. Never had her trembling just by looking at her. *Oh god. I think I'm starting to find him... sexy.*

It was a disconcerting thought. But not necessarily an unpleasant one. *He's slept with plenty of women, he must know exactly what he's doing in bed. He'd know just what to do to make my first time a nice one.*

Except of course, that Sirius Black would surely not want some inexperienced virginal sixteen year old in his bed, would he? Didn't he go for older women anyway?

Until Sirius pulled himself up, bringing his face level with hers, and without warning, leaned forward and kissed her gently on the lips. Very gently... but he lingered for a good few seconds, during which time Marlie's cool rationality collapsed entirely and her whole world view turned on its head. Or rather, everything about Sirius's behaviour over the past few months finally fell into place.

Oh my god. He likes me. He... really likes me. Her eyes widened as Sirius broke the kiss and, still smiling gently, stroked her cheek.

"Thank you," he said. He turned away, sitting up and making to get up... until Marlie, realising that it was now or never, acted.

"Sirius." He stopped, turning to look at her inquisitively as she sat up... then made a strangled noise of protest as she grasped the back of his head and pulled him to her, pressing her lips to his.

I have absolutely no idea what I'm doing. Fortunately for Marlie, Sirius didn't seem to mind. She felt him make some kind of noise, possibly a cry for more, possibly a demand to know what the hell she was up to, maybe begging her to stop... then she felt his hands on her, one on her back, one sliding up into her hair, both pulling her to him as his lips parted and he began to kiss her back every bit as fiercely as she'd gone for him. Marlie wrapped her arms around him and copied his movements. Pretty soon she was kissing without even thinking about it, lost in the bewildering new sensation of someone else's lips claiming hers, another person's tongue sliding into her mouth, someone else moaning incoherently and managing to dominate every single sense she had. It felt weird. It felt good. She put up no resistance as Sirius leaned into her, causing her to fall back onto the sofa, pinned down by him as he stretched out full-length. Breaking off the kiss, Sirius looked into her eyes as he stroked her hair, the smile gone. In its place was raw, predatory hunger.

"You want sex." It was not a question.

"Yeah," Marlie whispered.

"I know, I can smell it all over you," Sirius growled. He shifted against her, and Marlie felt something hard grinding into her, prodding her insistently between her legs. She gasped, fear and desire commingling all at once. *Oh my god, he's got an erection, I am giving him an erection*, and I haven't even done anything to him! *Oh god*. This was swiftly followed by: *Oh god, I'll have to look at it. Does he want me to touch it?? I'm not sure I'm ready for that. Suppose I do something stupid, like laugh, or something? Suppose I do something wrong? Oh god, I'm going to screw up and ruin everything, I just know it.*

Sirius had stopped, nose poised mere millimetres from her right ear, a quizzical look on his face.

"You're scared. You want it, but you're frightened."

"Yes," said Marlie, inwardly cursing as it came out in a frightened squeak. *Oh, nice one, Marls. There went the Slytherin Sex Kitten image.*

"We don't have to, you know," Sirius murmured in her ear, before tracing her earlobe with the tip of his tongue. "I know it'd be your first time. I know you're nervous. If you'd rather not..."

"I want to," said Marlie swiftly, surprising even herself. Sirius glanced up, amused... but she could sense the cynicism behind the smile.

"With me?"

"Yes," said Marlie firmly, shifting her hips, feeling him rub against her as she did. Damn, that felt nice. Marlie couldn't help letting out a little gasp of pleasure as he made contact with her more sensitive areas.

"Really." Sirius sat up a little, lifting his own waist away from hers, breaking the oh-so delicious contact and causing her to cry out in dismay. Sirius smiled cruelly at her reaction. Damn him. "Kitten, not half an hour ago, you were telling me you wanted me as a friend and nothing more. Now you want me to fuck you?"

"Yes," Marlie whimpered, shocked by the unexpected swearing - he was normally scrupulous about not using the stronger swear words in front of her. Oh, he knew what he was doing, all right. The sudden profanity had sent a jolt of pleasure right to her groin. *Fuck. I think I'm turning into a slut.*

Sirius raised an eyebrow, that maddening smirk still firmly in place.

"I see. Mind telling me what changed your mind?"

"You need it. I want it. And... you have the most amazing smile." Marlie's voice trailed off, wondering if perhaps she'd given too much away. Sirius seemed rather taken aback by that admission.

"I... you really think so?" Sirius asked, stumbling over his words in a way that endeared him to her even more. *He is so sweet... Oh Sirius, you've been so badly used, suffered so much, I just want to make it all better for you.*

"Yeah," she said, giggling a little. Sirius flushed, looking embarrassed - but he was smiling again, and Marlie knew she was doomed. Then he stripped off the vest he'd been wearing, and any misgivings Marlie might have had went dancing blissfully into the distance. "Yikes."

Sirius smirked at her. "Like what you see?"

Marlie could only nod, not trusting her mouth to form any sound other than "guh". If this was what an underfed and ill-used Sirius looked like, what the hell would he look like once he'd cleared his name and was living well again? Sirius's muscles, while not as well-toned as they could have been, were still there, still well-defined, and still more than capable of overpowering someone. Like her, for example.

"I'll take that as a yes," Sirius murmured, lying on top of her once more, deliberately wrapping her legs around himself and rubbing his groin into her. Marlie cried out at the contact.

"So you definitely want this, then," Sirius said calmly, all the while grinding into her remorselessly, apparently getting off on watching her squirm in response. Marlie reached for him, clinging on, nails digging into his naked back, angling her hips up to meet him. It hurt a little... but damn if the pleasure wasn't worth it.

"Yes," Marlie gasped.

"Sure?" Sirius purred. "Because you ought to know something. I've not had sex for over twelve years, kitten. And watching you right now... it's like a starving man at a feast. And you know what my table manners are like, darling." He emphasised the point by thrusting sharply up against her. Marlie cried out. That had hurt. Sirius hadn't been lying earlier when he'd said he was as dangerous as any werewolf. *But he also said he cared about me...*

"I'm not afraid." Marlie lifted her face to his and kissed him again. Sirius paused briefly before kissing her back. There was no gentleness this time. Sirius had grabbed her head and pulled her to him, mouth fixed on hers, tongue probing as he took everything she had to offer. Pulling her upright, Sirius reached behind her and began expertly undoing the fastenings on her robes, not breaking lip contact until the robes were loose and sliding off her shoulders. Then he let her go, helping her to wriggle out of them, leaving them in a heap on the floor, before sliding her hooded jacket off to join them. Her t-shirt followed, and she was sitting before him in jeans and her bra.

Sirius, breathing heavily, stared for a good, long minute at her chest, transfixed. Marlie's eyes flicked down to look at herself, before back up at him. He seemed to like what he saw so far. He glanced up, meeting her eyes with a brief flash of a smile, before sliding off the sofa and kneeling on the floor next to her.

"Beautiful Marlene," he murmured, using her full name for probably the first time in his life. "I'm all yours." Taking both her hands in his, he kissed them tenderly. Marlie closed her eyes, shuddering at the sound of his voice. *He thinks I'm beautiful. He's on his knees in front of me. I'm doing this to him, me!* The thought thrilled her as it terrified her: suppose she disappointed him? How was she ever meant to live up to this?

Then she'd been pushed back against the sofa as Sirius Black spread her legs, slid in between them and buried his face between her breasts, and she was too busy surrendering to his touch to worry.

Afterwards, Sirius collapsed in her arms, exhausted but content. Managing to stave off collapse long enough to cast some cleaning charms and pull Marlie's cloak over them both, Sirius curled up, his head on resting on her chest.

"You OK?" Marlie whispered, holding him close to her. Sirius nodded, eyes firmly shut.

"Perfect," she heard him breathe.

"You enjoyed it?" Marlie asked hopefully. He certainly seemed to have done, but it was always best to make sure.

"Yes," Sirius whispered, still in that dazed tone he'd used just prior to orgasm. "Oh god, yes."

"So did I," said Marlie softly, kissing the top of his head and holding him close to her. Sirius made no response, instead taking her hand and kissing her fingers before pressing it to his chest, his hand covering it entirely.

"Never leave me," Sirius whispered. "I need you so much, I -" He stopped midsentence, seemingly unwilling to say anything more.

Marlie could only hold him as tightly as she could, stroking his hair.

"It's alright," she said softly. "I'm here. I'll look after you. I promise."

Sirius sighed, nuzzling her breast before letting go of her hand and wrapping both arms around her, a contented smile on his face. It wasn't long before he was fast asleep. Marlie watched him doze off, feeling tired herself by now. *Well, what are we to each other now, I wonder? I don't know if I love you or not. I don't even know if you'd want that or not. Maybe you'd rather we stay just friends. We might never do this again. Who knows? But this I do know, there's nothing I won't do to keep you safe and happy, for as long as you need me.* For as long as he needed her. Who knew how long that would be? Until he cleared his name, at least. But then again, he'd also begged her never to leave him. Adjusting her grip on the sleeping male in her arms, she curled up and closed her eyes, preparing to sleep. For now at least, there was no doubt Sirius Black belonged to her.

When she woke up, it was too cold and emptiness. The common room lights were off, and the fire had burnt down to embers. She was still lying there, naked under her cloak, but Sirius was nowhere to be seen.

"Sirius?" she whispered, shivering in the chill air. "Are you there?" No response. *Maybe he had to go to the toilet or something.* But there were both girls and boys toilets just off the common room, and not a sound coming from either of them. And Sirius was far too lazy to have walked all the way back to the dorm. Well, not unless he wanted a cigarette or something, but she was sure he'd had some on him earlier. Something was very wrong here.

Sitting up, she swung her feet off the sofa, and felt them landing on a pile of clothing. Her clothing. Neatly folded and stacked in a pile, with her wand on top. *Very considerate of you, Sirius.* Too considerate. Dressing quickly, she shifted into Cleo and began tracking him, not at all sure what she was going to find.

The trail led back to the dorm, and it was still relatively fresh. He'd been here not that long ago, and was probably still around. His scent grew stronger, confirming that suspicion... but what it told her about him was not so welcome. When Sirius had come this way, he had smelt of fear. Fear and anxiety... and deep sorrow. Marlie quickened her pace, desperate to find him, but afraid what might await her.

She dashed into the dorm, and transformed. The fire was lit, and Sirius was there, fully dressed... and packing his things into the rucksack, his eyes hollow.

"Sirius?" Marlie stared at the bag, not wanting to believe what her senses were telling her. "What is this? What are you doing?"

"I'm sorry, kitten," Sirius said, so quietly she could barely hear him.

"You're leaving," Marlie whispered, her mind going numb. "You're going away. Without telling me. Without even saying goodbye. Were you actually going to wake me up before you left, or were you just

hoping to slip away quietly?" The silence was all the answer she needed.

"You *bastard!*" she shouted, feeling her throat tightening and tears starting to well up. Anger flared inside her and she flung herself at him, raining her fists on his chest. "You complete and utter bastard, how could you do this to me? I thought you cared about me, *how could you do this to me?*" She was sobbing by this time, liquid rage pouring down her cheeks.

"Kitten, stop it," said Sirius, grabbing her by the wrists and wrestling her away from him. "Stop it, please! Don't make this any harder for me."

"Why the hell not!" Marlie yelled at him. "We just had sex, and now you're running away without even telling me why? Did you stop to think about how I might feel about that?? Do you even care how I feel?"

"Of course I care how you feel!" Sirius shouted. "For god's sake, kitten, I I-" He stopped himself before he could say any more, closing his eyes. "I can't do this any more," he whispered, pained.

"Do what?" Marlie asked. "Bear to be around me? Look at me? Talk to me? Touch me, kiss me?" She went very quiet, feeling her voice and more besides about to break. "Was I that awful?"

"No, of course not," Sirius sighed, letting her go and pulling her unresisting into his arms. He held her close to him, planting a kiss on her hair. "It was good, Marlie. You were good. I enjoyed every minute. As long as I live, I will never, ever forget you." He released her, and to her surprise, Marlie saw that his own face was also wet with tears. "You mean the world to me, little Marlie," he said softly.

"Then why-" Marlie started, but a finger on her lips stopped her.

"It's because I care about you that I can't stay," Sirius told her. "Kitten, if I am found, I don't just think they'll send me back to Azkaban, I think they'll kill me on sight. If I'm lucky." He held Marlie as she cried out at this. "You've already done so much for me, darling. I can't ask any

more from you. It's getting dangerous now - with Moony around and in league with Snivellus, I could be discovered at any time. No, listen." Marlie had started to protest at this. "I know what you're willing to do for me, and believe me, I'm grateful. But I can't ask you to do all this for me. It's not your problem. You shouldn't be involved. If I'm caught, I don't want you to be brought down with me." He stroked her face, wiping away a tear with his thumb. "You should be out there enjoying life. Having fun. Being with your friends. Going out on hot dates with blokes your own age." Marlie backed away at this, her hand over her mouth as she let out an involuntary sob. Sirius felt his own throat tighten, but carried on regardless. "Not risking your life and your future for some vagabond convict who's old enough to be your father."

"Do you think that matters to me?" Marlie said, still hoping, praying this wasn't happening. "Sirius, you need me, you need my help, how are you going to get Wormtail without me? I want to help you, Sirius!"

"No!" Sirius said fiercely. "Not if it puts you in danger! Freedom is not worth your life!" He held his head in his hands. "Kitten, I cannot give you what you need. I can't be the man you deserve to have. You can do far better than me. Don't waste your youth chasing after me. Go and find someone who can give you all the things I can't."

"No," Marlie whispered, feeling empty inside. "No, this isn't happening. This is not real. You can't just walk away like this, you can't just take my virginity and run, you can't just use me and leave, *you can't do this!* I won't let you do this, do you hear me, *I won't let you!*" Launching herself at him, she grabbed his head in her hands and kissed him, lips savagely attacking his, desperate to force a reaction out of him, any reaction. She heard him cry out, felt his arms go round her, his mouth open under hers, and for a few too-brief seconds, she thought it had worked. Until she found herself violently shoved away, staggering back and colliding with the post of Luella's bed. Wincing at the pain in her shoulder, she slid to the floor, going numbly into shock as her mind began replaying another occasion when she'd sought affection and been cruelly pushed away... except this time, it was worse, so many times worse because he'd done it knowingly, and not only that, but only

an hour before, less than that in fact, had been inside her, screaming her name, then curled up in her arms, begging her never to leave him.

"Just the same..." Marlie whispered, bitterness and shock searing themselves on to her face, subtly laying the first traces of age on her features. "It's just the same, exactly the same, just like him, you're all the same, you're ALL THE FUCKING SAME!" She finished by screaming the words at him. "You say you care, but you don't, you just want to have your fun, have your little conquests, get the fucking t-shirt, and just run away without even having the BALLS to even tell me!"

"Marlie, that's not true," said Sirius as he stepped towards her, his face ashen.

"Don't touch me!" Marlie shrieked as he reached out for her. Sirius stopped, lowering his arm, the horror and despair in his eyes telling their own story, only deepening at her next words.

"I hate you," Marlie sobbed. "I *hate* you!!"

Sirius stared at her, a lump in his throat, fighting back his own tears. *Kitten, no, what have I done to you? To us? I've ruined everything, lost you for good, and for what? The sex was amazing, but it wasn't worth this...* If only there was a way he could turn back time, stop this ever happening... His hand went to his wand, his body acting before his mind could even finish formulating the idea. Marlie frowned, eyes following the movement, before widening in horror as she realised what he was planning.

"*Obliviate!*" Unfortunately for Sirius, his own training had helped hone already excellent reflexes, and Marlie had dived to the floor before he'd finished speaking. The hate in her eyes as she looked at him said it all - if he thought he'd ruined everything before, he'd destroyed it utterly now.

"Get out," Marlie hissed at him.

"Marlie, I'm sorry..."

"GET OUT!!" Marlie screamed, white-faced. Shaking, Sirius reached for his bag, slinging it on to his back and pulling his full-length coat over the top, before shifting into Padfoot and, with one last, longing glance, slinked out. Marlie looked away, waiting until he'd gone before curling up on the floor, finally giving in to her tears.

Chapter Twenty Six

Happily Never After

It was late at night, and the little girl should have been long asleep. But then, little Marlie Lovegood had never been one for rules. Certainly not when her parents had gone out for the evening, and Uncle Sirius had been drafted in to babysit. Marlie liked Uncle Sirius. He was nice and funny, and had long hair and an earring and a big black motorbike. He was also far more relaxed about things like bedtime and brushing your teeth and no snacks in between meals. However, even Uncle Sirius had his limits, which was why she was now tucked up in bed, thumb in her mouth and Pinkie the Rabbit curled in one arm, dreaming of a day when she might be able to stay at Uncle Sirius's, and be able to stay up all night eating chocolate and watching Uncle Sirius make her laugh with his impression of an owl and a cat in a fight.

"I'm going to marry Uncle Sirius one day," Marlie whispered to Pinkie. She'd read lots of fairy tales, and in all of them, you grew up, left home and got married to a handsome prince and lived happily ever after. Well, she didn't know any princes, but Uncle Sirius was certainly handsome, and if she married him, that meant she could live with him and every night could be like this. Of course, first he had to save her from an evil witch or wizard, or a monster or something. But Uncle Sirius was big and strong and an Auror too. She was sure he could save her from anything.

Curling up, she was about to go to sleep, when she heard it: a strange hissing noise. Marlie's eyes opened at once. The noise came again. It was coming from the wardrobe. Slowly, she turned around, her heart thudding in her chest.

There looming over her was the biggest snake she'd ever seen, with green scales and teeth the size of her arm, poison dripping off them. It hissed again and drew back, preparing to strike. Marlie shut her eyes and did what any three year old would do. She screamed. Loudly.

Downstairs, someone could be heard choking on a drink, slamming a can down, vaulting over the back of the sofa and racing up the stairs. Then the door slammed open, and Sirius was there, wand in hand, looking entirely different from how he normally did. Not laughing, not kind. Furious. He took one look at the snake and growled at it, pointing his wand at it.

"Get away from her," he said coldly. The snake turned to face him, hissed... and with a crack, changed into the vision of a ruined manor house at night, the sign of a skull and snake floating above it. Sirius went very still, swallowing hard and closing his eyes. Marlie stopped screaming, clutching Pinkie for all she was worth. The monster had gone, hadn't it? Why was Uncle Sirius looking so frightened? Uncle Sirius wasn't scared of anything, was he?

Then he opened his eyes, and with a wave of his wand, intoned one word: Riddikulus!

The scene changed at once, the skull and snake turning into the smiling and crying masks of a theatre, while the whole scene was suddenly surrounded by a Punch and Judy booth. Punch popped up, but he looked different, with a white hairless face, red eyes and no nose.

"That's the way to do it!" he snarled. "Avada Kedavra!" Then Judy popped up next to him, dressed in blue robes with light brown hair, brandishing her own wand.

"Oh no it isn't!" she snapped, and for some reason, she had a Welsh accent.

"Oh yes it is!"

"Oh no it isn't!"

"Oh yes it is!"

"Isn't!"

"Is!"

"Isn't!"

"Is!"

"Isn't!"

"Is!" Punch hit Judy with his wand. Judy staggered back, before recovering and replying with a brazen shout of "Isn't!" She then followed with a blow of her own. Punch glared, before hitting back, and before long a fight had broken out. This went on for about five minutes, with Marlie watching and laughing with delight, and Sirius looking on fondly, until finally Judy shouted a spell of her own, poked Punch in the eye, and danced with delight as he spluttered his last and keeled over, collapsing dramatically below the stage.

"That's the way to do it!" Judy cackled, before taking a bow, acknowledging the applause from Marlie and Sirius. Then she dived below the stage too, and the vision vanished.

"Gone!" said Sirius triumphantly. Noticing Marlie watching him in awe, he came and knelt next to the bed. "Are you alright, little Marlie?"

Marlie nodded, eyes shining. "You saved me!" she whispered, flinging her arms around him.

"Yes, I saved you," Sirius said indulgently as he disentangled himself. "It was just a Boggart. They're frightening, but they can't really hurt you."

"Thank you for saving me," Marlie whispered, still gazing at Sirius in adoration. Sirius grinned and bowed.

"All in a day's work, miss," he said proudly. He smiled at her, ruffling her hair affectionately. "If it comes back, give us a shout. It shouldn't though, not now you've just spent the last five minutes laughing at it."

"I will," Marlie promised. She looked shyly up at him, realising that one essential prerequisite had just been fulfilled. "Does that mean we can get married now?"

"Eh? What? Married?" Sirius choked. He gave her a very strange look. "What on earth gave you that idea?"

This wasn't quite the reaction Marlie had been hoping for. "But that's what happens in the stories," Marlie said, lower lip trembling. "The handsome prince saves the beautiful princess from the scary monster and then they ride off on his horse and get married. I mean, I know you don't have a horse, but you have the motorbike. That would do, wouldn't it?"

Sirius sighed, rolling his eyes. "I think you may just be reading a few too many of these, you know. Besides, you're only three -"

"Three and eleven months!" Marlie interrupted. "I'm four in November."

"Nearly four then," Sirius corrected. "You're still a bit young to be getting married. You have to go to Hogwarts first, and you can't go there until you're eleven."

Marlie's face fell. "Oh," she said, her eyes looking very round and sad. Sirius felt his heart go out to her. She was such a lovely little kid, she really was. Mischievous and troublemaking, perhaps, but still very sweet for all that. He hated seeing her upset.

Sirius reached out and squeezed her hand. "Listen, I'll make you a deal, right? You grow up and get big and strong, and go to Hogwarts and become a powerful witch like your mum, yeah? Then, when you've done that, if we're both single and you still want to get married, well, I'll think about it, yeah?"

"Promise?" said Marlie doubtfully.

"I promise," said Sirius, smiling tenderly at her. It would keep her happy anyway, and hopefully by the time she left Hogwarts, she'd be far too

busy with a boyfriend her own age to even remember that she'd once wanted to marry Sirius Black.

Marlie nodded, not entirely pleased, but willing to wait for now. "But you will still come and see me, won't you?"

"Of course I will!" Sirius declared. "How could I forget to come and visit my little Marlie? Little Marlie who insists we're going to get married one day." He winked at her, causing her to giggle and snuggle up next to him. Sirius put his arm around her, indulgent as always.

"And you will come to my birthday party, won't you?" she said sleepily. "I'll be four, you know. Four's really old and grown-up. It's much better being four than three."

"Oh definitely," Sirius promised. "Yes, I'll be there. Can't miss little Marlie being all grown up, can I?" Marlie smiled, closing her eyes.

"Yay," she whispered, sounding nearly fast asleep. Sirius took the opportunity to tuck the sleepy girl back in bed properly, kissing her on the forehead before leaving.

"Sleep tight, little Marlie," he said with a grin, before returning downstairs. Marlie burrowed under the quilt, Pinkie in her arms.

"I'm going to marry you one day, Uncle Sirius," she whispered before falling asleep. "Just you wait."

She never saw him again. The day after Halloween, her parents told her You-Know-Who was gone, but they wouldn't let her read the paper, and her mother wouldn't talk about the emergency call out she'd had that morning. When she asked when Uncle Sirius was coming back, her parents put her off, until finally her mother screamed at her to shut up, Sirius wasn't coming back, not ever again, and to stop going on about him. Marlie had run crying to her room, where her mother had later found her and apologised softly, all the while explaining that something terrible had happened to brave, strong, handsome Sirius Black, and he wasn't coming back ever again. Marlie had cried in her

mother's arms, but hope had stayed alive in her heart. After all, hadn't he promised he'd come to her party? Then the day of the party arrived, but Sirius did not come. The presents were given, the candles blown out, the games played, but still he did not come. The guests went home, the party ended, and still no Sirius. Finally, Marlie was put to bed. Her fourth birthday had come and gone, and Sirius had not come. Then, and only then, did Marlie believe her mother. He was gone.

He was gone. The thought bounced around Marlie's mind, echoing through dungeon walls and darkened halls in a mind dulled by grief, all other thoughts silenced by the one screaming phrase that had taken over and wouldn't stop. *He left me. He said he cared about me. But he still left me. I gave him everything, and he still left me.*

I hate you, Padfoot. I hate you because I will still protect you, I hate you because if you came back and said you were sorry, I'd forgive you. I hate you because I'd still sleep with you. I hate you because I can't get over you. Can't forget you. I hate you because I miss you.

I hate you so much.

Please come back.

She stayed like that for hours, lying on the bed that still smelt of Sirius, eyes looking but not seeing, tears rolling silently down her face, but not moving. She looked for all the world like she'd had the Dementor's Kiss. Ironic, really, given whose kiss really had done this to her. Not even the sound of footsteps in the corridor disturbed her. They weren't Padfoot's, not the dog's, not the man's.

The door opened. Marlie paid it no heed. It could be Voldemort himself for all she cared. If it wasn't Padfoot, she wasn't interested.

A trunk materialised by one of the beds opposite, the one next to her own. Then a black clad figure was crossing the room, and arms went round her, hauling her upright, holding her to a chest not dissimilar to her own, reddish-brown hair cascading around her face and a woman's voice crooning quietly to her in Welsh, of which the only word Marlie

could make out was 'cariad'. Marlie closed her eyes, fighting it, fighting to maintain the numbness that was keeping her from falling apart, keeping the pain away. Fighting the love and kindness trying to work its way in. Trying, and succeeding. Marlie felt something intangible, a warm blanket with as much substance as smoke and yet as solid as steel, wrapping itself around her, drawing her into communion with another soul, filling her with love she thought she wasn't capable of feeling any more. The dam within her broke, and she began to cry, softly at first, but then howling with rage, screaming wordlessly, fists hammering on the body holding her.

"Yes, let it out," she heard the woman whispering. "Scream, let it out, howl, rage, let go, let go, get it out before it poisons you, don't let it fester. Don't cut away your soul."

Marlie screamed, howling, sobbing, crying, screaming abuse and obscenities, a litany of hate and viciousness without a target, except there was only one who it was meant for. All the while, Marlie was held tight, her hair stroked, her back stroked, soothing words in English, in Welsh, in no language known to man, being whispered in her ear, a steady drip of caring to replace the poison. All the while, Marlie's alternately fading and furious aura found itself being touched by another's, enfolded in another's emotions and gently smoothed over, giving in as another's soul merged with her own, borrowed strength shoring her up, bandaging her mental wounds and patching together a broken heart. Finally, Marlie sobbed her last, exhausted and gasping.

"Cariad bach?"

"He's gone," Marlie whispered, the words finally escaping. "He left me. He... doesn't want to see me anymore." She looked up to where Rianne was watching her, brown eyes concerned but understanding. "He walked away, and he wasn't even going to say goodbye!"

Rianne kissed Marlie's head. "I know," Rianne said softly. "I felt it back in Wales. Right in the middle of Christmas dinner. Of course, I was also having an almighty row with my dad at the time, so I just ran to my room and started packing. Got hold of Snape on the Floo eventually -

he was at yours oddly enough. Guess your mum finally persuaded him to go along at last."

"Guess so," Marlie whispered.

"Anyway, to cut a long story short, he finally agreed to let me come back early, and opened a Floo connection from mine to the common room. He wasn't pleased, but I talked him into it. I think he only agreed because you were on your own here and I think he thought you needed the company. So here I am. And not a minute too soon."

Marlie wrapped her arms around Rianne's waist, clinging on to her friend for dear life. "Thank you," Marlie whispered, suddenly feeling overwhelmingly grateful that Rianne had come back when she had.

"Touch and go, you know," Rianne said softly. "You were cutting part of your soul away. It would have been locked down and festering, twisting your entire ability to feel, tainting your magic. You'd never have really recovered. You'd have been so vulnerable to Dark Magic, both when it's cast on you, and being tempted to use it yourself." She stroked Marlie's hair. "He's really hurt you bad, hasn't he."

Marlie nodded silently.

"Want to talk about it?"

Marlie shook her head.

"Maybe it's too soon," Rianne conceded. "But you'll want to soon. When you do, I'll be here. In the mean time, I did what I could, re-opening the connections, making you feel, then I lanced the hatred before it could fester. You're still going to hurt, but at least you'll heal cleanly. And you'll have me. I've temporarily joined our auras. Mine's wrapped around you. It'll help you feel better, help you feel stronger. I got plenty to spare. Just for a few nights, help you get back on your feet again."

Marlie nuzzled against Rianne, feeling the auric blanket of warmth and love enfolding her. "Thanks," she giggled drowsily, the foreign feelings making her feel lightheaded.

"No problem. Tired?"

"Yeah."

"Go to bed then. I'll be around if you need me."

Marlie nodded, letting Rianne help her up and lead her back to her own bed, helping her strip and change. After five years in close quarters with each other, none of the four were really shy about the others seeing them in states of undress any more. Even Deanna had been known to wander around in her underwear sometimes. Finally Marlie was in her pyjamas and tucked up in bed.

"Don't go," she whispered, clutching at Rianne's hand.

"I won't," Rianne promised. "I'll go no further than the bathroom. You just get some rest." However, as she tried to leave, Marlie whimpered, clutching at her hand.

"Oh bloody hell," Rianne sighed. Damn aura linking. Looked like she was going nowhere. "Alright, alright. But if Snape happens to drop by to see how I'm settling in and sees us like this, you're in trouble." Getting changed herself, Rianne slid under the covers next to Marlie, wrapping her arms around her friend, letting her rest her head on her shoulder. Marlie slid her arms around Rianne's waist, snuggling next to her.

"Thank you," Marlie whispered.

"Don't mention it. And I mean this quite literally. Don't mention it. To anyone. I'm only doing this because you're the most hetero person I know."

"Lucas is gayer than me?" Marlie grinned, forgetting the pain for a bit.

"Alright then," Rianne corrected herself. "Maybe you're not *quite* the most hetero person I know. But all the same, there's not much lesbian in you."

"Pity," Marlie muttered drowsily. "I might have more luck with women."

Rianne rolled her eyes. That'd be the day, Marlie going gay. More chance of Snape turning gay and propositioning Professor Lupin. Now that Rianne wouldn't mind seeing. She looked down at Marlie, curled up next to her and already fast asleep.

"You're going to be alright, Marls," she said softly. "Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow. But you will be. You're gonna be just fine."

"Sirius?"

Rianne was woken by the somewhat unnerving feeling of Marlie wrapping her arms around her waist, nuzzling at her neck.

Oh for fuck's sake...

"No. Rianne. Your mate, Rianne. Not your boy toy."

Marlie stopped, opening her eyes, vacant stare meeting Rianne's own. For a moment, Marlie just stared at her, uncomprehending. Until she remembered why she was curled up in bed with Rianne.

"Not Sirius," she whispered, before starting to break down in tears, collapsing on Rianne's shoulder and sobbing into her nightdress.

"No. Not Sirius," said Rianne, forcing herself to wake up properly. Damn Sirius. When she got hold of him, she was going to make him long for Azkaban. Ruffling Marlie's hair, she held on to her as best she could and waited for the tears to subside. Finally, they did.

"I thought it was him, you know," Marlie whispered, her voice ragged. "I thought it had all been a bad dream, and I was curled up with Sirius..." She bit her lip, fighting back a sob.

"Marlie..."

"But he's not here, he's gone, it really happened and I don't know what to do now." Marlie sounded more lost and despondent than Rianne had ever seen her.

"You're in love with him?"

"I don't know," sniffed Marlie. "I don't think so, at least I wasn't before... He was just a friend, and he drove me up the wall as often as he made me smile, you know?"

"Don't I know it," Rianne smiled. "But something happened, right? What did he do?"

"He was scared," Marlie whispered. "He was scared because his cover might be blown. He was scared, frightened, he didn't want to go back to Azkaban. So I held him in my arms to try and comfort him, and we were lying on the sofa. I just held on to him until he felt better, and then he said thank you, and he kissed me..."

"What, really kissed you?" Rianne raised an eyebrow. "Took him long enough."

"No, just on the lips. Hey wait a second, you knew he liked me?"

"Duh. It was obvious." Rianne couldn't help but grin at this. Despite the seriousness of it all, Marlie's obliviousness was rather touching.

"Not to me!" Marlie glared at her. "Why didn't you tell me??"

"I tried! I've been telling you to jump him for months! You were the one insisting you were just friends!"

"Yeah," Marlie laughed bitterly. "And look how it's turned out. We're not even speaking any more. And I'm not even sure why!"

"Tell me what happened," Rianne soothed her. "What did he do?"

"He smiled at me," Marlie whispered. "The bastard smiled at me, and I don't know, something happened, he looked... sexy. I'd never thought he'd looked sexy before." She shivered, trying to banish images of Sirius lying above her, crying out her name, flinging back his head, covered in a thin layer of sweat as he came. *And now I can't not find him sexy. Damn you, Sirius.*

"And?"

"I kissed him back. A real kiss, a proper kiss, my first. And I hadn't got a clue what I was doing, but he didn't seem to mind, and bloody hell, it was an amazing kiss. And then we ended up having sex on the couch."

When Rianne next spoke, it was in a very strained voice. "You poor thing. That must have been awful for you."

"Shut it, you," Marlie murmured, suppressing a grin. Never mind that she currently hated Sirius Black with a fiery passion, it had still been excellent sex. "I'll have you know it was very nice. I mean, it was a bit painful at first, and the bit beforehand where he gave me oral sex was better, but it was still fun, you know?"

"He gave you...?" Rianne stopped speaking, fighting her immediate impulse to go into a jealous hissy fit. "Marls. I officially hate you."

Marlie smirked. "Oh dear. Lucas not living up to his reputation, is he?"

"Shut up. And you can stop smiling like that too, you're meant to be heartbroken. So after the mind blowingly fantastic sex, then what? You had a row and he left?"

Marlie shook her head, the sweet memories of orgasm and kisses and whispered endearments fading. "No," she whispered. "He was already leaving when I woke up. I found him packing. He was just going to

leave and slip away without telling me. Without even saying goodbye!" She fell silent, tears in her eyes once more.

"Bastard," Rianne purred, reflexively cuddling Marlie. And yet at the same time, Sirius didn't seem the type for one-night stands, not with friends. Not with someone he cared about. He married a woman he didn't love out of duty and apparently had stayed faithful to her, despite all the problems they'd had. He wouldn't have given in to pure lust and taken the virginity of a sixteen year old girl just to get laid, would he? And running away afterwards certainly sounded out of character - Sirius had his faults but he was not a coward. *If he cared about you at all, he wouldn't have left. And I know he more than cares about you. You're the love of his life, and you don't even know it.*

"So what did he tell you then?" said Rianne, frowning. "He must have said something."

"Yeah," Marlie whispered, voice thick with pain. "He said it was too dangerous, us being together. That he might be found, and if he was, he didn't want me to be involved. He said I could do better than him, that he wasn't worth risking my life and my future for. That I should be out there having fun and enjoying myself." She tried to bite back a sob, but failed. "How can I have fun and enjoy myself knowing he's still in danger?" she wept. "How can I have fun with my mates when he's sleeping under a tree somewhere?" She stared up at Rianne, tears rolling freely down her cheeks now, all attempts to keep them back failing. "How am I meant to forget him and move on when he could be caught at any minute?"

Rianne held on to her crying friend. Damn Sirius Black. Why did he have to be so bloody *noble*? All very well not wanting to drag an innocent girl into trouble, but he'd left it a bit late to say so, hadn't he? Marlie was in far too deep now to be able to switch off her feelings and walk away as if nothing had happened. When she next saw him, he was in so much trouble...

At length, Marlie's tears subsided.

"What do I do, Rianne?" she whispered. "He's in so much danger, how am I meant to keep him safe now? He needs me. Especially now, with Moony here."

"Moony?" Rianne was now officially confused. Had Marlie gone mad with grief or something? "Who the hell is Moony?"

"Professor Lupin," said Marlie. "Apparently he and Sirius used to be friends at school. Sirius is a dog Animagus, it's how he's been hiding. But you see, Professor Lupin knows about it. If he sees Sirius in his dog form, he'll know who he is and go to the Ministry."

"I can see how that might worry him," murmured Rianne. "But Marls, don't you think he would have gone to the Ministry as soon as Sirius escaped if he was going to shop him? Don't you think the Aurors would already know and have caught him? And yet Sirius is still free. Between you and me, if Lupin does see Sirius in his dog form, I think that it's odds on he won't do anything. Either that, or he'll give Sirius enough of a head start to get away and go to ground."

Marlie shook her head. "It's worse than that. Professor Lupin's a werewolf."

"Yeah, I know," said Rianne. She couldn't help but smile at Marlie's shocked reaction.

"You know? But how?"

"Silver veins in his aura, you remember I pointed that out on the train? Well, after we got to school, I looked it up. Means werewolf, Marls."

"And you didn't tell me this earlier because...?" Marlie demanded.

"Er, because I figured it was his business and no one else's?" said Rianne. "Marls, he assured me his condition was under control, so I left it at that. He doesn't need the whole school knowing. So why's this a bad thing anyway? I would have thought it would be a good thing. A little piece of blackmail material if you do need to shut him up."

Marlie shook her head, and told Rianne how she'd come across Professor Lupin in his wolf form... and how she'd been wearing clothes under her robes that might have had lingering traces of Sirius's scent on them.

"That's why Sirius was worried," Marlie finished. "He's afraid that Professor Lupin will remember when he changes back, and report him. Not only that, but Professor Lupin seems to be getting on with Professor Snape, and Professor Snape hated Sirius when they were at school. If Lupin tells Snape, it's all over. Sirius is doomed, and I'm going to be asked a lot of awkward questions too. That's why he's scared."

"And that's why he had to run, I suppose," said Rianne thoughtfully. "If you truly have no idea where he is, you can't betray him if you're caught."

"Yeah, guess so." Marlie's face darkened as she realised that this must surely have been on Sirius's mind on some level. "The bastard! Wanting to protect me, my arse! He's running off and letting me cop the blame, that's what he's doing!"

"Ah now, Marls, give him some credit. The guy's not that cunning. Besides, if he heard you were in trouble because of him, he'd come and get you. I'm sure of it."

Marlie was sure of no such thing, but decided not to argue. Besides, there was practical stuff to be done, and there was none better at working that out than Rianne.

"So what are we going to do then? I don't even know if Lupin'll remember."

"Then we'd better find out," Rianne mused, brain ticking over. "In the morning, we hit the books, research everything we can on werewolves. In the afternoon, I'm going to drop in on Snape and ask about this potion he brews and how it works. And when he changes, you're going to be there in cat form to eavesdrop. Lupin says a word, stun 'em both

and call me on Lupin's Floo. If Lupin keeps mum, then you and he are going to have a little chat in the afternoon."

"And?" said Marlie. "What if he did smell Padfoot on me?"

"Then you tell him about this friendly black dog you saw on the grounds not long ago and which you've been feeding because it looked so pathetic and cold. Lupin likes you so will give you the benefit of the doubt, and you and Sirius are safe. Problem solved."

"And what about Sirius?" Marlie asked softly. "I'm no nearer to clearing him."

"We'll deal with that when we come to it," said Rianne, mind already focused on the job ahead of them. "In the mean time, we've got work to do."

In the end, it proved easier than expected to track down the information they were after. Snape's chance remark on the Wolfsbane having been developed by the Lycanthropy Research Unit at Miskatonic University set them on the right path, and before long Rianne had unearthed an article by Professor Whateley of the unit which summarised pretty much all they needed to know.

"According to this, it's caused by a magical virus," Rianne said, entranced by what she'd found. "Called the Lycan virus. It's been suspected for years of course, but until Professor Whateley and his team thought to run Muggle analyses on werewolf blood, no one knew for sure. The virus has the effect of insinuating itself into the victim's emotional and instinctive nature, taking control of it away from the conscious mind and giving it a life of its own. Which wouldn't be a problem, except the baser instincts aren't always socially acceptable. Fortunately, the virus's strength waxes and wanes with the moon, but it's always there, always having an effect. As the moon waxes, the victim's baser nature gets stronger, their impulse control gets weaker, their morals seem less important. There's physical effects too - the

increased strength and ferocity of the animal nature results in increased physical strength, sharper senses and ability to read body language and emotions, all of which reach a peak on the Full Moon. And when the moon is actually in the sky, without the Earth to shield its influence, the animal takes over entirely, changing the person physically into a beast, and a beast that's eager to break all the social rules that normally keep it cooped up. The worst change is on the Full Moon night itself, but the two nights either side can also cause shifting, depending on the moon's proximity to full. The victim might not lose their mind entirely on those nights though, or they may not change entirely - it's believed this has given rise to tales of wolfmen and Bigfoots. They might not change at all, depending on when the moon is exactly full. Whatever, the moon still affects their mind - they're still more aggressive, violent, prone to anger, oh, and horny. They get quite horny too."

Marlie really wished Rianne hadn't read that last bit out. She wasn't sure she wanted to think about Lupin feeling horny, especially not right now.

"Bit like the menstrual cycle from hell, then," said Marlie, trying to change the subject.

"Pretty much," Rianne grinned. "Fortunately, after the moon has passed full, it all starts to subside again. Given the exhausting nature of the change, they're usually not a problem afterwards, they're too knackered to do anything. By the time they're feeling physically recovered, the moon's moved on and they're feeling more normal. Up until the New Moon, they'll generally feel mellow and relaxed, but also more prone to depression. Once the moon turns again and starts waxing though, they'll start to feel more active and energetic, although still harmless. Then the moon will pass First Quarter and start going gibbous, and the problems start all over again."

"And Professor Lupin has to go through all that every single month," Marlie whispered, stunned. "Man, and I thought my periods gave me trouble. I'll never whine about my cramps again."

"I'll hold you to that," Rianne grinned. In reality, Marlie suffered relatively little from that particular problem, but then again, Marlie's tolerance for pain and discomfort was not high, which could convince an independent observer that Marlie spent about three days of every month being stabbed repeatedly in the abdomen with forks.

Marlie was peering over Rianne's shoulder, trying to see what else the article said. "So what does the Wolfsbane do then? How's that work?"

"Well," said Rianne, "and this should interest you, current research is focusing on the Animagus transformation, believe it or not. As you obviously know, mastering that involves getting to know your emotional self and your animal instincts, getting in tune with them so they'll work with you rather than against you."

Marlie nodded. The books she'd read had gone on at length about the need to know your inner self, to master the Beast instead of letting it master you. It was the hardest part to master, and was what made the transformation so difficult for most. The only reason Marlie had managed it was because she'd already worked through a lot of her issues in her Sleeping Death trance, making it actually far easier than she'd been led to expect.

"It's these parts of the psyche that the Lycan virus specifically targets. The theory is that the disease is like the Animagus transformation gone horribly wrong and out of control. So far, attempts to use Animagus techniques with werewolves have failed badly, as the trance to meet your inner animal usually involves said animal attacking the soul of the victim when werewolves try it, but there are certain potions that simulate the transformation, and these helped form the basis of the Wolfsbane potion."

"Potions??" Marlie cried. "There's potions that can turn you into an Animagus? I went through all that trancework for nothing??"

"Simulate, Marls, I said simulate. The transformation induced by one of those doesn't last long, and needs more potion to be repeated. It's not true Animagism. Besides, it's probably best you avoided the potions

route. God alone knows what would have happened if you'd tried to brew one." Rianne was grinning at this. Marlie's potions expertise, or lack thereof, was legendary.

"Shut up, you," Marlie scowled. "Go on then, if you're so good, tell me how it works."

"It works by diverting the Lycan virus's field of operations," Rianne explained. "Just as Animagus potions work by temporarily forcing your animal nature into your body, causing a transformation, this does the same. It diverts the Beast into the body, freeing the mind. Of course, the side effect of that is that the victim becomes a wolf for the whole three days or so around the Full Moon, but at least they're not a dangerous one."

"Yeah, but how much do they remember afterwards?" Marlie asked. Rianne scanned the rest of the article, before closing the journal.

"Doesn't say. Guess you'll have to find out the hard way." Rianne turned to Marlie with a faint smile. "See it as making a vital contribution to scientific research."

"Great," Marlie sighed, gathering her things. "Why can't my life ever be simple?"

Fortunately, Snape proved somewhat more helpful on the effects of the Wolfsbane, having had plenty of experience with the after effects over the past few months, and Rianne was able to report back that while Lupin remembered what had happened during the change, the fact that he'd experienced everything through the senses of a wolf meant that he frequently had difficulty sorting it all out in his head afterwards.

"So he might remember, but not be sure about it?" said Marlie hopefully.

"Pretty much. But you'll still have to talk to him," Rianne grinned. "Sorry, Marls. You're not home safe yet."

However, there really wasn't much they could do until Professor Lupin changed back the next morning. So Rianne, in a bid to keep Marlie occupied and too busy to mope over Sirius, decided that now would be an opportune time to ensure that there were no traces remaining of the dark-haired Animagus. And so they set to thoroughly cleaning the bathroom, the dormitory, the corridor, Rianne and Deanna's beds, the common room, and anywhere else Sirius might have been or touched. It was a painstaking and exhausting task - the long black hairs seemed to have got everywhere. Oddly enough, Marlie had no problems clearing out the bedroom and bathroom. It was the common room that did her in, especially when she found the black toy dog that she'd got in her Christmas cracker.

"Marls?" Rianne asked, wondering why she'd stopped. "What's up - oh. Where'd that come from?" She indicated the dog, which Marlie was holding in her hands, staring at it with hate in her eyes.

"Mood Cracker," said Marlie distantly. She stared at the dog as it barked at her... before screaming in fury and hurling it into the fire. As it burned, Marlie put her hand to her mouth as the tears started to flow again. She stood like that, tears rolling down her cheek as Rianne held her, watching the dog burn, simultaneously missing and hating Sirius more than she'd ever thought possible.

And then another night came and went, another night when Marlie wept silently into Rianne's shoulder, and Rianne held on to her, silently cursing Sirius and wishing that for once, Sight would co-operate and show her a way forward for them all. Sight being the bitch it was, nothing came to her.

Then the alarm went off at some ungodly hour and Marlie found herself being prodded awake by Rianne.

"Marls. Wake up."

"Eh? Wha'? Wassup?"

"Wake. Up. I ain't gonna say it again."

"Jus' two more minutes."

"No, now!"

"Don' wanna... zzz."

"Enervate!"

"GAAHH!" Marlie sat up, rubbing her eyes, now in that most unpleasant state where she was tired and craving sleep, yet not actually feeling sleepy. "Rianne, you bitch, what was that for??"

"Sunrise in half an hour. And count yourself lucky it's December. Now get your arse up to Lupin's room and find out what he's telling Snape. Unless you want your boyfriend to be thrown to the Dementors, of course."

"He is not my boyfriend!" Marlie snapped as she slid out of bed.

"Ex-boyfriend then."

"He was never my boyfriend at all!" Marlie said bitterly. "He was my friend, and just because we ended up having sex and he buggered off afterwards for no good reason, that doesn't mean we were ever an item."

"Course not, Marls," Rianne muttered as she snuggled into the blankets. "You don't have feelings for him in the slightest."

"That's right," Marlie nodded. "I'm not in love with him. Was never in love with him. He's just some bloke I had a one-night stand with. That's all."

"As long as you believe that, Marls," said Rianne sleepily.

"Bitch," Marlie muttered. Raising her voice, she called out, "I'm going now. I'll be back later. I think the Floo comes down here, so I'll leave the fire on just in case. And if you do hear me screaming your name, for god's sake, wake up and come and help me!"

Rianne just grunted. Sighing, Marlie pocketed her wand, pulled on her dressing gown and slippers, and changed, disappearing at a run.

Half an hour later, she was discreetly letting herself into Lupin's office with a quick Unlocking Charm. Fortunately for her, the office was empty, although she could hear voices coming from Lupin's room. One was Snape's baritone, but the other belonged to a woman. That wasn't good. This whole plan had been based around it just being her, a tired and below par Lupin, and Snape. Not Snape and someone else, a someone else who Marlie now recognised as Caitlin Tyler. Oh god. Against Snape, with the element of surprise, she had a chance. Not Caitlin and Snape together. *Sirius, I'm so sorry.*

Still, she had to find out how bad things were. She closed the door behind her. From within the bedroom, conversation stopped. Marlie shifted her ears, straining to hear what was being said.

"Someone's out there," she could just hear Caitlin say. Severus's low baritone was practically unintelligible to a cat's hearing range, but he sounded sceptical. Caitlin did not reply, but Marlie could hear footsteps approaching. Hastily transforming again, she dived under Lupin's desk.

Caitlin emerged from the room, dressed in a silk negligee and kimono, wand in hand, eyes scanning the room as if they could see through walls. Marlie hoped that that was one skill Caitlin didn't have. She watched as the other woman made her way to the door, opening it and looking out into the corridor, frowning. Taking the chance while she could, Marlie darted out and into Lupin's bedroom while the door was still open. Snape, busy watching over the sleeping werewolf, did not notice as she slipped in without a sound and concealed herself under the wardrobe. It was one of the old-fashioned kind on wooden legs, with a good six inch gap between the floor and the base of the wardrobe. It wasn't perfect, but it would do. Marlie turned her attention

back to Snape, who was sitting cross-legged on the bed, Lupin's head in his lap, scratching behind the wolf's ears. He looked almost fond of the animal. Marlie then noticed something else disturbing - he too was in his nightwear, a pair of black silk pyjamas. Which meant that he and Caitlin had spent the night here. Together. Marlie scanned the room. No other beds in sight apart from Lupin's double bed. Which meant they'd shared a bed. Marlie closed her eyes, trying to fight the wave of nausea threatening to fight its way out. *No. Nononono. Snape is NOT having sex. Please, no. Not with Deanna's mum. Oh GOD. What the hell can she see in him??*

Caitlin re-entered the room with a frown, closing the door behind her.

"Well?" Snape asked as she sat down next to him.

"No one there," she replied, somewhat sulkily.

"I told you you were being paranoid," Snape smirked, tickling Lupin under the chin. "Didn't I, Remus?"

Caitlin raised an eyebrow. "Oh, so it's Remus now, is it?"

Snape shrugged. "I can call him Remus if I like. It's his name, after all. Besides, he calls me Severus."

"Yes, but that's because he's a nice and friendly people person," Caitlin pointed out. "You on the other hand are a miserable old sod who hates everyone, and that's on a good day."

Snape actually pouted at this. "I don't hate everyone. I seem to recall telling you I was rather fond of you."

"Fond, is it?" Caitlin purred, wrapping her arms around him. "Only fond? After all I do for you?"

Marlie closed her eyes and flattened her ears. *Lalala, not hearing this, not hearing this.* Unfortunately, she couldn't help but hear smutty giggling and the distinct sound of kissing. *Sirius, if the Aurors don't find you first, I will kill you myself for making me witness this.*

Fortunately, it seemed someone was smiling on Marlie. It was at that moment that Lupin whined, the change back into human form beginning. Snape immediately pushed Caitlin back and out of the way, scrambling off the bed himself as the wolf began to thrash about, whining and howling as bones and muscles warped. Marlie watched, horrified yet ghoulishly fascinated. It wasn't at all like the Animagus transformation. That took place in seconds and didn't hurt at all. That was just like pulling a second set of clothes. This on the other hand was an actual physical transformation, and not a pleasant one either. It seemed to go on for ages, then all of a sudden, it was over, and Remus Lupin was curled up on the bed, shivering, naked and whimpering softly. Marlie looked him over, mentally comparing him to Sirius. Shorter. No tattoos, but the scars across his chest and on his arms made up for that. Not much different build-wise, although Marlie had the feeling that Sirius, when well-fed and in good condition, was rather more muscular than Lupin was. However, Lupin won on the body hair stakes. Sirius had hairy arms and legs, but very little on his chest, just a sprinkling of black hair in the centre of his chest, and on his stomach. Whereas Lupin seemed to be covered in it. Still, he wasn't bad looking by any means.

And it didn't look like she was the only one who thought so either. Caitlin was looking altogether far too pleased at the prospect of tucking him into bed.

"Did you bring any muscle salve with you, Severus?" she purred. "He looks so tense, look at him."

"Yes, I brought salve. And no, you are not rubbing it in. Last time I let you do this, you spent far too much time fondling the poor man's bottom."

"But he's got such a nice bottom..." Caitlin pouted.

"Caitlin, *no*."

"Spoilsport." Nevertheless, Caitlin did help Snape pull the half conscious werewolf into bed, rolling him on to his front. As Caitlin

watched, running her fingers through Remus Lupin's hair, Snap produced a bottle of salve from the bedside table and began to rub Lupin's back and shoulders.

Lupin moaned softly, arching his back into Snape's hands.

"Remus?" said Caitlin softly, flexing her fingers as she massaged his neck.

"Padfoot?" Lupin whispered. Underneath the wardrobe, Marlie froze. Was this it? Was Lupin going to give the whole game away?

"Who's Padfoot?" Caitlin asked gently.

Lupin seemed to deflate on hearing her voice. "He's not here," he said sadly. "Never will be here again. Thought I smelt him... while I was changed. Thought he'd come back again. But it wasn't him. It's never him. Never see him again..." Lupin let his head fall back on the pillow, burying his face, trying to muffle his sobs.

Caitlin stared at Snape, concerned. "Is he alright?" she asked softly. Snape just shrugged.

"Waning moon making him maudlin, I don't doubt. Mooning after some old boyfriend by the look of it."

"I didn't know he was bisexual," Caitlin raised an eyebrow. "You learn something new every day." She was now looking at Snape in a rather calculating manner.

"Caitlin. Don't even think about it. I am not participating in any kind of sexual activity with him for your amusement. Or at all."

"Shame," both Caitlin and Lupin said together. Snape immediately stopped his massage and got to his feet.

"Right," he snapped. "Lupin, you are clearly feeling better and have no further need of our ministrations. Caitlin, come. Let us leave Lupin to sleep. *Alone.*" This was said with a rather pointed look at Caitlin.

Pouting, she slipped off the bed, kissing Lupin on the head as she tucked the blankets around him.

"Goodbye, Remus," she told him. "We'll come back and see you later, hmm?"

"OK," Lupin murmured in response, snuggling into the blankets. Smiling, Caitlin pulled her slippers on and went to join Snape.

"Alright, darling, I'm coming."

Snape just growled in response, putting an arm around her and leading her out into the office. Throwing some Floo powder into the fireplace, they disappeared, returning to Snape's quarters. To do what, Marlie would rather not think. Instead, she slipped out from beneath the wardrobe, relieved beyond measure that all was well, that Sirius was still safe. Not that she would care if anything did happen to him, of course. He just didn't deserve to die, that's all.

Leaping on to the bed, she settled down next to Lupin, curling up on the blankets, watching him with interest. Odd, looking at him now. On one level, he looked no different. But on the other hand, Marlie had never seen him look so vulnerable. Before, she'd seen him radiating a calm yet powerful presence that had seemed to mesmerise her at times. Yet now, he just looked old and tired. It didn't stop her wanting to comfort him, but it had changed the way she saw him, somehow.

Then he opened his eyes, and Marlie felt a jolt run through her. There was an intelligence in those eyes, a power that gave the lie to his apparent vulnerability. Marlie froze, realising that it perhaps had been a mistake to write him off entirely. Before she could move, Lupin's hand had snaked out and grabbed her, now stroking her fur.

"Well now," Lupin murmured. "I've not seen you before. Where did you come from then, eh?"

Marlie mewed, trying to wriggle out of his grasp. Lupin let her go, sadness in his eyes.

"Even the animals won't stay near me," he sighed. "God, I'm a werewolf, not a demon." He closed his eyes. "Ah, Padfoot, Padfoot, why'd you do it? Why did you leave us? I know I wasn't enough for you in the end, but did we all treat you so badly you had to turn like you did? You, Prongsy, Wormtail, you were the only ones, the only ones who really accepted me. God, I miss you all so much." He buried his head in the pillow, sobbing quietly. Marlie watched, feeling torn between running and staying. But in the end, there was only one choice. Didn't she know how he felt after all? *You're not the only one he walked out on.* Crawling back over to him, she began to pat his head, meowing. Rolling on to his back, Lupin scooped her up, clutching her to his chest, smiling sadly at her.

"Changed your mind, little one?" he whispered, kissing her. There were still tears in his eyes. "Thank you. I could do with the company."

Marlie snuggled into his arms, glad of the warmth, but far gladder to be held by someone who, on some level at least, knew how she felt, understood her own pain. And so, enjoying the feel of being in a man's arms again, even if it was in cat form, Marlie fell asleep.

It was some time later that Marlie finally woke up and, glancing at the clock by the bed, realised she'd been there three hours. *Oh god, Ri's going to freak.*

She slipped out of Lupin's grasp, fortunately without waking him, and made for Lupin's office. Once there, she shifted into human form, closing the door behind her, and made for the fireplace. Lighting the fire and adding some Floo powder she'd had the foresight to tuck into her pocket, she hissed Rianne's name.

After some minutes, Rianne's head appeared in the flames.

"Marls? What's up?" she asked sleepily. "Problems?"

"No, just checking in," Marlie replied. "Lupin remembers smelling Padfoot while he was changed, but I'm not sure he fully remembers when or why. He didn't say anything to Snape. I just need to talk to him when he wakes up to see if he's connected anything with me."

"That's good," Rianne nodded. "And it's taken you three hours to work that out, has it?"

"Shut up," Marlie muttered, feeling herself go scarlet. "If you must know, this is the first opportunity I've had to get out." Well, it was sort of true.

"Course it was," Rianne smirked, and Marlie had the feeling Rianne could see only too well. However, she was prevented from pursuing this any further by the sound of movement in the next room.

"Go!" Marlie hissed. "I think he's getting up!" Rianne nodded curtly, disappearing at once. Marlie broke the connection at her end, and got up, preparing to bolt for the door.

Too late. The door opened, and Lupin staggered into the room, yawning and scratching his head. Before Marlie could transform and hide, he'd already looked up and seen her. Marlie froze, panicking inside. This was the last thing she'd wanted to happen. How was she going to explain this one?

"Marlene?" said Lupin, rubbing his eyes. "What on earth are you doing here?" He blinked and stared at her clothes. She was still wearing pyjamas, dressing gown and slippers. "And, er, why are you still in your nightwear?"

"So are you," Marlie pointed out.

"Yes, but I've only just got out of bed," said Lupin. "And I'm still in my quarters. You on the other hand aren't."

"I, er, wanted to know how you were feeling," said Marlie, smiling brightly. "I tried fire calling but there was no answer, so I Floo'ed up here from the common room, and didn't think to get dressed first..."

She faltered, wondering if this was actually going to be believable, or more to the point, forgivable. "You, er, don't mind, do you? It's just that I wanted to know if you were all right after the Change; I've heard it's really painful."

Lupin went very still as she said this, and Marlie recalled that not a word had been said to the human Lupin about her knowing his secret. Which meant she was reliant on the wolf's memories.

"Sir? Are... are you OK?"

"Yes," Lupin laughed shortly. "I'd forgotten you knew, that's all." He motioned for her to sit down. "Can I get you anything? Tea, coffee? Orange juice? Water?"

"Just tea, thanks," said Marlie as she sat down. "Milk, two sugars."

Lupin nodded, picking up an antique Muggle telephone, dialling a number and placing an order for two teas. Marlie raised an eyebrow, not least at the fact that the telephone wasn't connected to anything. Lupin replaced the earpiece and sat down opposite her.

"It's a way of contacting the kitchens," Lupin explained. "Staff members' privilege. I don't use it often, I generally prefer to eat my meals in the Hall with the rest of the staff, but sometimes it comes in useful."

"I see." Two steaming mugs of tea appeared on the desk. Marlie picked hers up and sipped it, watching Lupin nervously. Now what would he do?

He didn't seem to know either. Lupin sighed and ruffled his hair, staring at the desk. "So you know now."

"Yeah," said Marlie, suddenly fascinated by the steam rising out of her mug.

Lupin closed his eyes. "I'm sorry you found out the way you did," he said quietly. "I think I scared you, didn't I?"

"It was a bit of a shock," Marlie admitted. "I didn't hurt you, did I? When I shut the door on you?"

"I think you broke my nose," said Lupin, starting to grin.

"Oops," said Marlie, hiding a smile behind her hand. "Er... sorry?"

"You're forgiven," Lupin laughed. "Not every day you find out one of your teachers is a werewolf, after all." He became serious again, watching her through saddened eyes. "Does it bother you? You can tell me the truth, I won't mind. I know when Professor Snape first told you, your initial reaction... wasn't positive."

"Mum doesn't like werewolves," said Marlie. "She always told us they were savage beasts, killers with no regard for human life." She looked at Lupin, finding it hard to believe anyone could see him as a monster. "But you always seemed so nice and friendly. Even as the wolf, you looked harmless."

"Thanks to Professor Snape's potion," said Lupin. Darkness still lingered around his eyes. "Marlene, without that, I'd be the monster your mother thinks I am. To my knowledge, I've never killed or infected another human, but there's always a first time. The rest of the world is right to be wary. No one who's not an Animagus is truly safe around me."

"I'm not afraid of you," said Marlie gently. "And you're not a monster either. In fact, if anyone does say that, point me at them and I'll give them a piece of my mind for you. I might even be able to arrange a beating, if you like." Well, if she could track down Sirius anyway...

Lupin raised an eyebrow. "I don't think that will be necessary, Marlene, but thank you for the offer." He regarded her oddly. "You are getting disturbingly violent, you know. I feel I ought to be worried. You know, you're starting to remind me of someone I used to know."

"Oh, really?" said Marlie innocently. "Who?"

"Never you mind," Lupin replied. Again, a quizzical look. "Are you really not afraid? Not disgusted by me?"

Marlie shook her head. "No. Should I be? Snape reckons you're safe. And you didn't hurt me before. You're still you, even with that virus thing."

"You've been doing some research," Lupin nodded, approving. "Smart girl."

"Thought I'd better be prepared," Marlie shrugged. Now it was her turn to eye Lupin up, as she recalled what she'd learnt. *It must be so weird, having a Beast loose inside you, constantly lurking, always watching, waiting for the Moon to set it free.* It was one thing being an Animaga, but at least she had control over when and if her inner animal came out. It was always under her control, always. If she did change instinctively, it would be because her mind had decided it would suit them best to do so, not because the Moon forced it. Marlie couldn't even comprehend being frightened of part of herself. Her inner demons were, for the most part, conquered and tamed, and this tended to lead her to assume everyone else had done the same with theirs. It was very strange knowing that Lupin's psyche was not fully his own. Strange... but intriguing, as Marlie began to ponder the similarities with her own Animagism. *Sirius and I could communicate mentally via our Beasts, when we were changed. I wonder if it would work with a werewolf...* Sliding one hand into her pocket, she shifted it into a paw. Full shifting wasn't feasible, but part shifting might work. After all, it still opened up the part of her mind her own inner Beast lived quite happily in. Looking up, she gazed into Lupin's eyes, and as she'd done before with Padfoot, nudged her Beast into making contact with Lupin's.

Lupin for his part had been watching her, feeling more relieved that he'd dared express. *She doesn't hate me. She's not running in disgust. She still likes me. I never thought... I never thought she'd still care if she knew. Ah, Melissa, your daughter is twice the witch you are, at half your age.*

But she does not know all, he heard the Beast, still strong within his mind, whisper to him. If she knew what we wanted to do to her, she would not be so pleased.

Lupin silently told it to shut up, trying not to think of the fact that Marlie was sitting not three feet away from him, not even a desk in between them, wearing nothing but her nightwear. That underneath those pyjamas, she was naked, and it would take seconds to tear them off and reveal the firm, young flesh beneath. Concentrating hard, he just about managed to force the Beast to back down... until he felt it. A foreign presence, probing his mind... and making contact with the Beast.

Beast? Talk to me?

With horror, Lupin realised that the presence was none other than Marlie, somehow telepathically talking to him. He screamed at her silently to back off, get out, that the Beast was not to be trifled with. But she didn't seem to hear him. The Beast however could hear all too well. Growling, it shoved him aside as it took full possession.

"Foolish young one," he heard his own voice rasp out. "What were you thinking? So close to the Moon, you humans shouldn't be anywhere near the Beast."

Marlie's eyes widened as she realised what she'd done. *He's still physically human, but his mind's been taken over by the wolf. Kinda like reverse Wolfsbane. And it was me who let it out.* Damn. Kicking her chair back, she staggered away, hoping to get between him and the door. The door which she'd locked behind her, and which Caitlin and Severus hadn't used. Double damn. Lupin had got to his feet and was prowling towards her, a crooked smile on his face and a hungry look that Marlie recognised all too well. She'd seen it in Sirius's eyes not two days ago, except then it hadn't been nearly so frightening. Sirius would have backed off if she'd told him no. Sirius she knew would never harm her. *Sirius I'd wanted to touch me...*

And then Lupin was on her, pinning her against the wall with his entire body, growling as he ran the tip of his nose up her neck. Marlie shivered as he did so, reminded of Sirius doing the exact same thing. Except Sirius had made her want to fling her arms around him and kiss him, rubbing up against him in turn. This just made her want to run. *Oh Sirius, help me, please.* Except Sirius was long gone, and no one else was going to be running to help her now. Just her and the Beast.

Lupin began to unfasten her pyjama top, breathing deeply as he slipped a hand inside. As his palm brushed the golden necklace that Marlie never took off, he whispered a name that wasn't hers.

"Melissa..."

The spell that seemed to be holding Marlie broke, as her necklace flared into life at the violation. Marlie found herself watching, a detached spectator looking on as her furious dark twin, the source of her Animaga-Beast, surged into life, taking her over. Watching as her right hand shot out of her pocket, transformed into an oversized cat's paw, wickedly pointed claws flexing out, the points barely an inch from Lupin's eye.

"Get the hell off me."

Lupin for his part had also been looking on, but he'd been far from detached. He'd been screaming, desperately trying to stop the Beast as it had pounced on Marlie, adrenaline singing through the veins they shared.

Want, have, need, second chance, she does not fear us, we could have Melissa back again, better than Melissa, because Melissa would see this and suffer, time to take revenge, time to enjoy her again...

Lupin could only watch as the Beast grabbed Marlie, who seemed too stunned to react, and thrust her against the wall, luxuriating in her scent. Lupin, as if things weren't bad enough, realised with mounting horror that part of him was aroused by this. *Nonono, this is wrong, this is wrong, have to find a way to stop this!* The Beast, heedless of his

protests, carried on regardless, unfastening her top and brushing against that little Snitch necklace she always wore.

Marlie had gone very still as he'd done this, and something in her eyes had changed. Her scent changed too, and suddenly she no longer smelt entirely human, but feral. In fact, she smelt almost exactly like the cat he'd held earlier. A cat that was nowhere in sight... And then the Beast stopped in its tracks as four deadly looking claws appeared inches from his eyes.

"Get the hell off me."

Lupin glanced down at the claws, and realised with a shock that the claws were where Marlie's nails had once been, and that instead of a hand was a cat's paw.

Animaga, he and the Beast both realised at the same time. Cat Animaga, the same cat that he'd held in bed earlier. Lupin could only chuckle at the irony. Even as the Beast stared in dismay, Lupin couldn't help but feel proud of her. *That's my Marlene. No wonder you said you weren't afraid.*

Moving slowly, Marlie brought her left hand up, shifting it so that another set of claws was at Lupin's other eye. Changing her right hand back, she reached for her wand, which was tucked into the waist band of her pyjama bottoms and had thankfully not fallen out.

"I have had just about *enough* of you men just taking what you want without giving a *damn* about what I want or how I feel!" Marlie hissed as she lifted her wand up. "Fucking hell, why is it that the one I actually *want* to molest me listens to his conscience instead of his heart and buggers off, whereas the one I just want to be friends with ignores his conscience entirely and goes straight for his dick?? I don't know which one of you is the more annoying!"

Lupin idly wondered who the other one was. Fred Weasley, perhaps? But Marlie had turned him down, hadn't she? Of course, it might all have changed since then. Meanwhile, the Beast had been stopped in

its tracks. If Lupin hadn't known better, he'd have sworn it was actually hurt.

You... do not want to mate with us? he heard it whisper. But that was not as shocking as the reply he heard whispered back, Beast to Beast.

I have a mate. You are not him. He is better than you. This was said with an undercurrent of pride and satisfaction, and brief flashes of lovemaking, lovemaking that had been enjoyed, very much enjoyed from the feel of it. Well. So Marlie had lost her virginity. God alone knew who to. And yet that lover, who was only visible in bits and pieces, seemed hauntingly familiar. Frustratingly, Marlie was screening him off, leaving him only partly visible, and not able to be heard or smelt at all. All he got was dark hair, muscles, sexual skill, a lot of raw passion and oddly, a loving and romantic streak a mile wide. It was maddeningly familiar. *I know this man. But who on earth is he?*

He felt the Beast backing off, actually whining.

"This cannot be," he heard the Beast cry. "You, you were mine. You wanted me, you looked in my eyes and gave yourself up to me. How can there be another?"

Marlie just gazed back, her eyes hard and cold.

"Once, maybe," she said wearily. "But you don't know me anything like as well as you thought, Beast. And I've really had enough of men toying with me and using me. Now get back in your cage and let Professor Lupin out, before I make you."

"Make me?" he heard the Beast growl. "And you're going to do that how?"

Marlie rolled her eyes. No, the Beast really didn't know her as well as it had thought. It had been one of the first things she'd done, after making that first deal with Padfoot way back in September, to go and learn the spells that would force an Animagus in and out of its animal form. No reason they wouldn't work on werewolves too.

"*Sapiens*."

The spell sent Lupin flying back into the far wall. Marlie watched as he slumped to the ground. For a moment, he just stayed there, motionless. Marlie kept her wand trained on him, waiting to see if it had worked. Luckily, it had. Lupin shook his head, blinked, rubbed the back of his skull and looked up, eyes dazed but recognisably more human than they had been.

"Marlene?"

"Professor?" Marlie did not lower her wand for a second. Lupin nodded slowly.

"It's me. You... you're safe. I... oh god." He looked like he was about to be sick. "Are you alright? Christ, what have I done? *What have I done?*" He was backing into the wall, staring at her in horror. Marlie couldn't help but be reminded of Sirius after he'd nearly knifed her. Except that time, she'd been the innocent victim, caught up in a mess not of her making. This time, it had been her meddling that had triggered this whole thing. Maybe he'd tried to molest her... but she'd started the whole thing, by poking into things best left alone.

"You did nothing wrong," said Marlie fiercely, sliding down to sit next to him. She tried to reach out to comfort him, but he flinched away at the slightest touch of her fingers.

"*Don't*" he gasped. "God, how you can bear to be near me after what I just tried to do to you, I don't know."

Fucking hell, is this some kind of cosmic joke or what? The exact same words Sirius had used too. Marlie could only sigh wearily.

"It wasn't your fault, no more than what you turn into on the Full Moon," she tried to reassure him. "It was me, I was stupid, thinking I could handle it, poking where I had no right to." Her voice softened as she settled herself next to him. "I violated you first. I'm sorry."

"Marlene, *no*, don't you dare try and apologise, you are in no way to blame for this!" Lupin snapped. "I overstepped the mark, lost control, and if you hadn't been an Animaga..."

"It would never have happened in the first place," said Marlie firmly. *No, because then I'd never have met Padfoot, and then I would never have had to be here, and I wouldn't have been able to trigger the Beast anyway. Bloody Animagism. Bloody Padfoot. Source of all my problems, you are. Bastard.*

Frowning, she realised that not only had she gone and ruined everything with Professor Lupin, she'd gone and given away one of her big secrets. This was getting worse by the second.

"So how long's that been going on then?" Lupin asked, curious.

"Since the start of term," Marlie sighed. "I perfected it over the summer. My cousins were able to talk Lockhart into letting them in the Restricted Section to look for books last year, we practiced while we were on holiday in the States with no Ministry and no magical parents to see what we were up to, and then Draco brought some books over for me. And it all kind of followed from there."

"I see. And does anyone other than me know about this? Your mystery boyfriend, for example?"

"He's not my boyfriend," Marlie snapped, hoping her inner panic wasn't showing too much. *Oh god, if he realises it was Padfoot...*

"That's not the impression I got from what I saw," said Lupin, aware this might be a sore point. "Whoever he is, you're attached to him, you care about him. Your Beast seems to think he's your chosen mate."

"My Beast also seems to think that my personal life is none of your bloody business," Marlie retorted, edginess making her sharper than she'd meant to be. This topic of conversation could only lead to Questions, of the variety that she'd rather not answer.

"You're right," said Lupin quietly, looking away abashed. "It isn't. Just one thing - you are taking precautions, aren't you? I'd hate to see you ruining your future by getting pregnant."

"No, no, don't worry," Marlie laughed, with a light heartedness she did not feel. "That's all taken care of. No babies for me."

"That's alright then," Lupin nodded. He looked away, staring at his fingers as they fiddled with the cord on his dressing gown. "As long as your life's not ruined. Mine may have just fallen apart, but I'd hate to see yours do the same."

"It's not..." Marlie faltered, suddenly realising the full impact of what had just transpired. Noble, Gryffindor, given to idiotic acts of self-sacrifice... Hadn't Sirius asked her to turn him in? Given that Lupin's nature was not entirely dissimilar, it didn't take long to realise what he was implying. "No, you can't resign! Not over me!"

Lupin shook his head, smiling bitterly. "Yes I do, Marlene. It's a sackable offence. I can't in all honesty stay as a teacher now, can't be around young people. Certainly not you."

"You can't!" Marlie cried. "You're a really good teacher, you shouldn't go! Not in the middle of the year like this!"

"I don't have a choice," said Lupin softly. "How can I look you in the eye now? I cannot be around you, Marlene! It's not safe for you!"

Christ Almighty, not this again. As if it wasn't bad enough from Padfoot...

"I'm not exactly defenceless, Professor," said Marlie, briefly shifting her eyes, reminding him what she was. Lupin shook his head.

"Doesn't matter, the Beast will find a way round that eventually. You don't know the half of it, Marlene."

"So tell me," Marlie replied. "Don't I deserve to be warned?" Her eyes narrowed, as she recalled a detail that had been nagging at the back of

her mind. "The Beast called me Melissa, Professor. Did you know my mum?"

Lupin leaned back against the wall, eyes shut. "Yes," he admitted.

"You fancied her," Marlie whispered. "But she didn't want to know? Did she find out you were a werewolf?"

Lupin nodded. "More than that," he said sadly. "We were together, we were in love. But I could never bring myself to tell her. Then she found out anyway, and dumped me. The Beast never really got over her. When it laid eyes on you... I think it wanted a second chance, and when you didn't turn away after finding out..."

"Poor thing," said Marlie, feeling almost sorry for the poor, lovelorn, psychotic monster.

"Don't feel sorry for it, it's got no scruples whatsoever," Lupin snapped. "I don't even want to think about what nearly happened. God, I almost..." He couldn't finish the sentence.

"It wasn't you, though," Marlie whispered. "It was the Beast."

Lupin shook his head, his eyes still staring emptily at her. "No," he whispered. "The man was enjoying it too. The Beast is me, is part of me. It's not a nice part of me, but it's part of me. What it does, I am responsible for. And I'm not one to ignore my responsibilities. Marlene, you'd better go. I need to get dressed and start packing. Severus was right all along."

No! No way in hell! Marlie couldn't believe this was happening, that she'd just cost Lupin his job. He would do it too, he was just like Sirius in that regard. Gryffindor men, idiots all of them. Fingering her wand, she considered her options, before deciding there was really only one course of action open to her. Lifting her wand, she cast a Woodworm Hex on Lupin's chair, causing the nearest legs to crumble and the chair to collapse, crashing in their direction.

"Marlene?" Lupin gasped. "What are you doing - umph!" Marlie darted forward and kissed him briefly on the lips.

"What I have to," she said tenderly, stroking his cheek. *Ah, what might have been, Professor. But you couldn't have handled the strain, and I don't want to wait to leave school. Besides, there is Padfoot now, oh, and the tiny little detail that you used to fancy my mum. I so don't think so.* "Because you don't deserve this." She lifted the wand to his face. "*Obliviate!*"

The spell hit Lupin before he could react. Dazed, he sank back, trying to shake the confusion out of his head.

"Wha- what happened?" he asked. "Why am I on the floor? God, my head..."

"Your chair collapsed," said Marlie, feigning surprise. "You fell off and hit your head. Sir, are you alright?"

"I - I think so," said Lupin uncertainly. "I just don't remember any of it." He tried to get up, before sinking to his knees. "No, maybe I'm not all right," he admitted.

"Don't try to move," Marlie warned him. "Just sit still. Tell me what you do remember."

"I remember you telling me you didn't mind me being a werewolf, and that you've done some research into the whole thing," said Lupin vaguely. "I don't remember after that."

Excellent, the charm had worked perfectly.

"Yeah, that's when the chair collapsed," said Marlie, relieved. "Looks like woodworm to me. You'd think Hogwarts furniture would be more reliable, wouldn't you?"

"You'd think so," said Lupin, wishing the room would stay in focus. "Ow, my head..."

"Ah, you'll be all right," said Marlie briskly. "Come on, let's get you to bed. A rest will do you the world of good." Helping him up, she led him into the bedroom, and helped him lie down on the bed. Retrieving the Muggle telephone, she placed it by the bed. "Can you call Madam Pomfrey on this thing?"

Lupin nodded.

"Good. You have a rest, and if you feel any worse, give her a call. You're probably just concussed, but it doesn't hurt to make sure." There was a ring of truth to all this - he'd hit the wall pretty hard, and probably really was a bit concussed.

"Yes, Nurse Lovegood," said Lupin, grinning at her. Marlie allowed herself a small smile. He was going to be fine. She made to leave, until Lupin grabbed her hand.

"Marlie. Thank you. For not turning away."

Marlie managed a smile as he squeezed her hand. "No problem," she replied, wishing the guilt would go away. "No problem at all."

It was only after she'd closed the door on him that she realised how much she was shaking.

Chapter Twenty Seven

United We Stand...

"What happened?" Rianne had taken one look as Marlie staggered back into the common room and immediately made her sit down, pouring her a drink.

"I think I just did something really stupid," Marlie whispered, wishing her limbs would stop bloody trembling.

"Oh god," Rianne muttered. "Goes without saying, really. Does Lupin know about Sirius?"

"No, I ended up Obliviating him." Marlie took a sip of her drink and told Rianne what had happened. Rianne listened in stunned silence until she finished.

"Bloody hell, Marlie. What were you thinking?? Trying to talk to the inner wolf? He's not a wolf Animagus, he's a werewolf! Dangerous! Werewolves kill, and Wolfsbane doesn't sedate the Beast, it just forces it into his body and out of his mind during the strongest phase. It's still active. And you went in and started poking it?"

"Yeah," Marlie confessed. "Oh god, I am such a moron."

"Yes, and it's a bloody good thing Sirius taught you that partial shifting trick, or you'd be a rape victim on top of that, and Professor Lupin would probably be throwing himself off the Astronomy Tower right about now." Rianne glared at Marlie. "You, Marls, are an idiot."

"Sorry," Marlie whispered, shrinking away. "I was just curious..."

"Yes, and we know what curiosity does to cats, don't we? Gods almighty, Marls. Well, it looks like no harm's been done this time, but you were lucky." Rianne's attitude softened. "Are you alright?"

"I think so," said Marlie softly. "It's just scary, you know, seeing someone turn like that. Someone I trusted. I know he's a werewolf and everything, and it's different for them, but we've all got a Beast, you know. You, me, Sirius, everyone. Suppose someone else loses control like that? What if it happened to Sirius?"

"I don't think it would," said Rianne. "He's got his aggressive side, but he's not vicious. He'd take it out on someone or something else, or just walk. He wouldn't hurt you. He's an Animagus, don't forget. His Beast works for him. Not the other way around. He won't lose it for no reason. No, you need not fear Sirius."

Marlie did smile at that. "No, I don't," she grinned. "I want to smack him repeatedly. But I'm not scared of him. Never really have been, you know? Well, apart from that one time he held a knife to my throat. That was a bit frightening. But he didn't know who I was, so that's sort of different. But no, I'm not scared he'll attack me. In fact, I've never felt so safe as when I've been with him..." She let her voice trail off, fighting back the ache in her chest that made its presence felt whenever she thought of Sirius. *I miss you so much, Padfoot. Wherever you are, I hope you're alright.*

"I think Tish thinks of him as her boyfriend, you know," Marlie sighed, fingering her necklace. "That's what she snapped back to Professor Lupin's Beast, that she already had a mate, a better mate. I mean, maybe it was just talk. But maybe not. Oh god, Rianne, I don't want him as my boyfriend! It'd be weird! Besides, he doesn't feel the same anyway. He likes me, but I don't think he's in love with me. I mean, he wouldn't have left if he was in love, would he?"

Rianne rolled her eyes, resisting the urge to scream at her. *Actually, he adores you, he just doesn't want to put you in any more danger. He's going about it completely the wrong way, but nevertheless he really cares about you.* Damn him.

"Who knows?" said Rianne, ever the diplomat. "Men can be very strange sometimes, especially Gryffindor men. They're very prone to doing stupid things for no reason. Not unlike certain other people I

know." She shot a glare at Marlie. "You two are practically made for each other."

"Oh shut up," Marlie muttered, ruthlessly repressing the little flare of hope that had briefly arisen inside her. "I'm traumatised, cut me some slack."

"Yes, you look devastated," Rianne returned.

"Not by Professor Lupin," Marlie grimaced. "Professor Snape."

"Don't tell me you were probing around in his mind too."

"Ew, no!" Marlie tried not to picture what she might find if she did that. "God, it was bad enough watching him and Deanna's mum snogging."

"Snogging-" Rianne put her hand to her mouth, trying not to laugh. "Oh god," she managed to get out. "Well, I did wonder if there was something going on there, but that's not quite how I'd expected it confirmed. You poor thing. Are you alright?"

"No!" Marlie snapped. "I'm never going to recover! Professor Snape and shagging are two things that should never, EVER, be in the same sentence. EVER."

"Oh dear," said Rianne, her voice far weaker than it normally came out as. "Never mind. I'm sure there's worse things to be confronted with first thing in the morning."

"Oh yeah," seethed Marlie. "Much worse things! Like finding out Professor Lupin used to go out with your mum, and that the Beast fancied you mainly because it wanted to replace her! Or possibly hurt her. Who knows. Whatever, the Beast was thinking of *my mum* when it was pawing at me, and THAT, let me tell you, is bloody unsettling! God, where is the alcohol stash, I need a drink."

Silently, Rianne opened the secret booze stash, accessible only by prefects and seventh years, and poured two shots of Firewhiskey. Marlie knocked hers back with less grimacing than Rianne expected.

Rianne, not a regular drinker by any means, but no stranger to Firewhiskey either, drank hers rather more sedately.

"Do you want me to Oblivate you as well?" Rianne asked after a while. Marlie shook her head.

"No, I want to keep the memories as a warning. Just in case I for some reason decide it might be fun to poke the Beast again." Marlie scooped up Snowy from where he'd been curled up under her chair, and began to ruffle the cat's fur. Rianne, leaving Marlie to her own devices, headed back to bed. Time to give Sirius Black a piece of her mind.

He'd hidden himself well, Rianne granted him that. Far away from human habitation, further than she'd thought a dog could ever manage, shielded by elaborate magical protections that kept prying eyes off him, hiding out in a cave with a fair few of the things Marlie had bought him, Sirius Black had well and truly gone to ground.

Sadly for him, Rianne's Scrying skills had been up to the challenge, and she'd located him within twenty minutes. Five minutes after that, she'd astrally projected. And now she was standing in a deep cave that had been decked out like a Muggle sitting room, watching Sirius Black lying on the sofa, smoking and staring into space. For once, he was actually wearing clothes that covered his body- jeans and a black pullover. Pity, really. Rianne had hoped to be able to get some ogling in while she was there. Shimmering, she made herself visible.

Sirius glanced up, noticed her, and sat up immediately, dropping the cigarette and grinding it out with a Doc Marten clad foot.

"Rianne?! What the bloody hell are you doing here?"

"Looking for you," Rianne replied, sitting cross-legged on the floor. Or at least, she did until a squawk from behind her made her jump, and twist round.

Staring at her warily was an eight foot tall creature with a horse's back, and an eagle's front, with huge wings folded on its back. The look in its eyes was not friendly.

"Sirius," said Rianne faintly. "What is that?"

"Cute, isn't he?" Sirius grinned, his surprise giving way to a certain pleasure at seeing her wrong-footed. "He's called Buckbeak. Or Bucky, for short. He's a hippogriff."

"Yes, I know it's a hippogriff," Rianne sighed, feeling a headache coming on. "Why have you got one in your cave, and more to the point, where did you get it from?"

"Ah now, that's the interesting part," Sirius said, becoming increasingly animated. "See, I was just leaving the Shack, having collected all my stuff and shrunk it into my bag, and I happened to be passing by Hagrid's cottage - Hagrid is still the gamekeeper, isn't he? Only keeping hippogriffs seems up his street."

"Yes, he's still there," said Rianne, suddenly beginning to see where this was leading. "Sirius, are you telling me that you stole Hagrid's pet hippogriff?"

"I didn't steal him!" said Sirius indignantly. "He was chained up outside and looking miserable. So I went over to see if he was alright, and it struck me that he'd be a lot happier if that collar was off him. So I cut it away with a Severing Charm, and he was so grateful, he agreed to give me a lift. So we ended up here, and he likes it here so much, he doesn't seem to want to leave..." His voice trailed off as he saw the way Rianne was looking at him. "What?"

"You," said Rianne incredulously, "are unbelievable. You do realise that hippogriff attacked a student a few months back? It's meant to be up before an official hearing in January!"

"Not now he ain't," Sirius yawned. He shot a grin at Buckbeak. "So you're a fugitive too, eh, Bucky old son? I find I like you even more

now." He turned back to Rianne. "So, you going to say hello to him then? Introduce yourself?"

Rianne looked rather nervously at Buckbeak. That beak looked deadly, and even though she knew Draco had been winding it up, she still couldn't shake off images of the blond Slytherin lying on the ground in a pool of blood.

"It's alright, you know," said Sirius gently. "He won't hurt you if you treat him right. You just got to show him a bit of respect, that's all. Come on, you're dating Marcus Vetinari's son, you must know a thing or two about placating touchy males."

Which was all very well, but Lucas didn't have talons as big as her head. Still, she reminded herself, it wasn't like she was physically here or anything. Approaching it cautiously, she dropped a curtsy.

"Er... hi Buckbeak? My name's Rianne, I'm a friend of Sirius's. It's an honour to meet you." Hesitantly, she waited, hoping this was going to work. Sirius gave her an encouraging smile. Rianne could only wish she shared his confidence. Fortunately, Sirius had always been good with animals, and he was proved right again. Buckbeak lowered his head, bowing. Rianne let out a breath she hadn't realised she'd been holding.

"See?" Sirius smiled. "That wasn't so hard, was it? Now, come on, sit down, and you can tell me why you're here. Is everything alright?" His expression changed to one of concern as Rianne sat next to him. "Is Marls OK? Has... has something happened to her?"

Rianne decided it was best not to mention Marlie's encounter with Lupin. Sirius would only go mental and do something stupid like go after Lupin, risking his life and freedom in the process. Not only that, but if Lupin couldn't even remember what had happened, it was a bit unfair to inflict a furious Sirius on him.

"You happened to her, Sirius Black," said Rianne, her voice cold and flat. "What the hell were you thinking?? Running off like that? I didn't

think... I didn't think you would do that to a woman you cared about, to a friend. Didn't think you would run out on the woman you loved. Or maybe I was wrong. Maybe you were just after a quick shag after all."

"She told you that?" Sirius whispered.

Rianne nodded. "Yeah. I came back early, and found Marlie lying on her bed, looking like she'd been Dementor-kissed." Sirius winced at the metaphor. Rianne carried on, unrepentant. "What do you think you were playing at, Sirius? You'd just taken her virginity, she thought you cared about her, then you run away! She's devastated, you know? Completely bloody devastated! It was all I could do to put her back together again, and even then, she'll never be the same again. Never. Congratulations, Sirius, you've broken her heart."

Sirius couldn't meet her eyes. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "It was for her own good. I'm trying to protect her, I'm trying to keep her safe, I - !" He rested his head on his arm. "I adore her, Rianne," he sighed. "Absolutely fucking worship the kid. If anything happened to her..." He couldn't finish the sentence. "Whenever she's with me, she's in danger. Helping me, she's in danger. Just by associating with me, her life is at risk! And if we became a couple, that'd only increase. We'd both be more likely to take stupid risks to see each other, and if anything happened to me, well, this is probably going to sound really stupid, but I wouldn't want her to be upset. She's too young to be a grieving widow, Rianne."

"And what you have put her through is preferable, is it?" said Rianne softly.

"She'll get over me," said Sirius roughly. "She'll find herself a bloke her own age and forget about me. She'll forget about me, just like she did when I got sent down. It's for the best. She doesn't deserve a washed-up old wreck like me." His eyes told a different story, however. They had a dead look about them, an empty, helpless look that could only have come from Azkaban. That bloody place had a lot to answer for. It was enough to make Rianne want to slap him, or someone or something else. The Sirius Black of old would never have just walked

out on someone he loved. The Sirius Black of old would have fought for his happiness.

"Don't you deserve to be happy?" said Rianne. "Don't you deserve to be able to smile again? To remember who you were? The old Sirius would never have walked away."

"You never knew the old Sirius," Sirius snapped at her. "The old Sirius is gone. He died in Azkaban, Rianne, and he's never coming back."

"Maybe," said Rianne, refusing to let this drop. "But when you're with her, he comes back, doesn't he? Bit by bit, another memory you thought you'd lost to the Dementors comes back. Bit by bit, emotions you never thought you'd feel again come back. Every time you lay eyes on her, you remember who you are. When she's in your arms, it's like Azkaban never was." Rianne's eyes were gentle now, willing him to understand. "If you go back to her, she will take you in again, you know. Go back to the Shack, I'll send her over. Sure, you'll have to grovel, and you can expect her to scream and throw things, but she will forgive you in the end."

"Yeah, that's what I'm afraid of," Sirius sighed. "If I go back, that's it. I'm stuck there. I can't leave her again, it would tear me apart. It was hard enough this time. I couldn't do it again. And if I go back, it's only a matter of time before we end up kissing, or worse, having sex, and if *that* happens, then I'm really stuffed. One shag can be put down to a one night stand. Two, and I won't be able to hide it any more. I'll have to tell her I'm in love with her, and we're going to end up in a relationship. I can't do that to her, I just can't. Can't tie her to me."

"Have you spoken to her about this?" said Rianne, trying to coax a smile out of him. "You never know, she might not mind being in a relationship with you."

"Maybe not at first," said Sirius, his voice flat and emotionless. "But sooner or later, she'd want more than I can ever give her. She'd get bored and leave me, and I think it might just kill me..." His voice broke as he said this, and he looked away, burying his face in the crook of his

arm as he leant against the sofa. More than anything, Rianne began to wish she'd borrowed Marlie's broom and come out here herself. He needed touch, human contact, more than anything. He needed to be held. Rianne flexed her fingers, frustrated that they'd go right through him if she tried to touch him.

"She wouldn't leave you," Rianne tried to reassure him. "Not because she was bored. She cares about you!"

"Yeah," she heard Sirius reply, his voice dull. "And that would be worse. For her to stop loving me, but *not leave*. To stay there, wanting to be rid of me but not able to walk away because she didn't want to hurt me, to have her by my side, slowly starting to hate me, to look into her eyes and know she didn't feel the same... I couldn't leave her, Rianne. She'd have to be the one to do it, but I know she never will. That's why I'm running away. If I don't do it now, I never will. It's for the best..." But he sounded on the edge of tears.

"Sirius," said Rianne, edging nearer. "Stop it. Stop this. God, Sirius, you've been away from her less than three days, and this is what it's done to you. It's like you're back in Azkaban again." Sirius did not answer, but he did flinch at the word Azkaban. Rianne pressed on. "You need her, Sirius. You aren't going to make it without her. Sirius, listen to me, if you don't go back and work with her, you're not going to get your name cleared. You can't do it alone, you will need help. If you and she work together, you can have the real culprit put away by Easter, if not sooner. But you're not going to get many chances! There's one, one chance. But balls it up, try to go it alone, or make her go it alone, and you might not get another. Please, Sirius. Will you think about it?"

There was a pause. Then... "Maybe," Sirius grunted.

It would have to do. Seeing she was going to get no further, Rianne got up to leave. "Here's hoping you do, Sirius," she told him. "When Marlie comes, and she will eventually, listen to her. Your freedom might depend on it." Without another word, she disappeared, fading as she returned to her body. Sirius watched her go.

"Buckbeak," he said wearily. "You ever get the feeling that life's got it in for you?"

"What do you mean, disappeared??" Lucius Malfoy shouted at his Floo Connection. "How can a full grown Hippogriff just vanish into thin air?"

Molly Weasley shrugged, unbothered. Draco, watching from the dining table with his mother, could have sworn she was trying not to laugh - he'd seen the same expression on Ginny's face before now.

"As yet, we don't know, but most of us think that it was stolen. The collar had been sheared off with a Severing Charm."

"Stolen?" Lucius fumed. "Set free, more like! Have the Enforcers arrested that oaf Hagrid yet?"

Molly's expression did change at that, darkening. "We've spoken to Hagrid and he has no idea how it happened. He went up to the school for Christmas afternoon to have drinks with the other staff, and when he returned later on, the Hippogriff had vanished. All the staff are willing to vouch for him being there, and the charm that cut the collar was cast while he was still with them. Besides, he's not capable of casting Severing Charms, he wasn't at school long enough." Molly was looking at Lucius as if he was personally responsible for Hagrid being expelled.

"Well, have they spoken to the students then?" Lucius demanded. "It's not beyond one of them to have cast it, surely?"

Draco's thoughts instantly turned to his cousin. Marlie was quite capable of Severing Charms - but she already had a broom, and he couldn't really see her riding a Hippogriff at all, never mind stealing one for a joke.

"There's hardly any of them there, and they were all in their common rooms in any case. Besides, Marlie Lovegood and possibly Hermione

Granger are the only ones who can do Severing Charms, and we really can't see them doing something like this."

Lucius was about to contest this, when Narcissa cut him short.

"Lucius, darling, she has a point. Marlene's not the type to do this - besides, she has a perfectly serviceable broom."

Lucius growled and turned back to where Molly's head was hovering in the fire. "Fine. May I take it the matter is being investigated?"

"Yes, the DDAE were informed," Molly sighed. "They're looking into it." She decided not to mention that one of the prime suspects was Sirius Black. It wouldn't do for the Dark Lord's former alleged henchman to know how Black was seemingly able to sneak on to the school campus with impunity, would it?

"And the hearing, what of that?" said Lucius, his voice betraying his impatience. "Is it still going ahead?"

"No, we're cancelling it," said Molly, looking a bit too pleased with herself. "Lucius, it's unanimous," she said before Lucius could raise a cry of protest. "If there is no Hippogriff to try, then there is no point. Wherever it is, it's not on campus any more - we've searched it thoroughly. And if it's not on campus, it's not under our remit. If it's ever found, we'll consider re-opening the case, but seeing as it's vanished off the face of the earth..."

Draco hastily squelched the urge to cheer. No hearing meant the Hippogriff got to live! He didn't have to feel guilty any more! He could have happily kissed whoever had taken the animal. One glance at his mother revealed that she was looking as relieved as he felt.

Lucius ended the call and rejoined them, his face like thunder. Draco swiftly wiped the smile off his face and fixed on his most neutral expression, concentrating furiously on his lunch.

"Never mind, darling," Narcissa soothed her husband. "At least if it's not at school, it won't be able to injure any more children."

"That's not the point," Lucius growled, stabbing at his turkey with more vehemence than was really needed. "I wanted an example made!"

"Yes, and I'm sure Dumbledore has understood your point," said Narcissa. "Don't let it get to you, Lucius. There's more important things to worry about. It wasn't a matter of life and death."

"It could have been." Lucius turned to look at Draco, something rather like concern in his eyes. "Draco, I'm sorry. I wanted the beast that hurt you to pay."

"Er, that's alright, Father," said Draco, going pink and looking away. He hated it when his father got all sentimental like this. Fathers weren't meant to worry about their children so openly. "Just one of those things. It was probably my fault anyway, I probably ruffled its feathers the wrong way or something."

"Nevertheless, it shouldn't have been there in the first place. I should demand compensation, perhaps."

"Oh Lucius, let it go!" Narcissa cried, throwing her hands up in the air. "Draco's unharmed, and we don't need the money! What would be the point? Besides, I hate court cases, they're so vulgar. Not to mention all the stress and the worry. My dear, I don't think my nerves could take it."

Which was a complete lie, as Narcissa was one of the toughest witches Draco knew, and she and he both knew it. Nevertheless, Lucius seemed to buy it.

"Oh, very well, woman," he muttered. "If it bothers you that much, I'll let it go."

Narcissa smiled her sweetest smile at this. "Oh darling, would you? Thank you so much, you don't know how I've been fretting, ever since

you lodged that complaint. It's been simply awful." Her voice broke slightly at this, causing a very uncomfortable Lucius to take her hand and start reassuring her that he was sorry he'd caused her any worry. Draco rolled his eyes. Maybe there had been some truth to that, as it had been because of Narcissa's urging that he'd provoked the Hippogriff in the first place, but even so, Narcissa was far stronger than this. How his father could somehow still see her as a delicate little flower requiring protection from the world, Draco would never know. *When I get married, he told himself, it will be to a woman who is not afraid of me. One who is not only strong, but not afraid to show it. One who's not scared at all.* And quite despite himself, a pair of dark eyes floated before his mind...

Finally, the Christmas holidays drew to a close, and the peace of the holidays became a distant memory as students filled the building, laughing, joking, shouting and generally making the place look untidy. Slytherin was no exception, its denizens as pleased as any to be back at school. Two in particular had been looking forward to the reunion taking place on the front steps at Hogwarts.

"Hey folks!" Deanna yelled as she leapt out of the carriage. "Did you miss us?"

"Right up until you shouted in my ear," Rianne replied. "Now my eardrums are wishing you were back in Surrey."

"But the rest of you missed me, right?" said Deanna, winking at Marlie.

"Yeah, alright then, if it'll make you happy," Rianne sighed, giving Deanna a hug. "Welcome back."

By this time Luella had staggered out of the carriage and made her way over.

"I hate getting out of those things," she complained. "Why can't they build them a little closer to the ground, hmm?"

"Because the bottom would drag along the ground," Deanna told her. "Silly."

"Silly. Of course. Because there is no way of building a four wheeled vehicle with a door less than three feet high without it dragging along the ground. Unless you're a Muggle car manufacturer, of course." Luella turned to Marlie. "Come on, Marls, back me up here. What Hogwarts needs is a fleet of limos, right?"

Marlie was too busy staring forlornly off into the distance, eyes scanning the horizon for a black dog that wouldn't be there.

"Marlie?" asked Luella. "Hello?"

"Eh? What?" Marlie noticed that her friends were back. "Oh! Hi, you two! Welcome back!" She hugged Luella, who looked at her rather oddly.

"Nice to see you again too. Marls, are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just a little stir crazy from being on my own so long."

"See, told you it would drive you nuts," Deanna said as she hugged Marlie. "You should have come back! It would have been great! Mum's been staying at your place since the attack, in case Black strikes again. So I had to stay at your place over the holidays. We could have shared a room, had all night slumber parties! It would have rocked! I mean, it was still cool hanging around with your brother, but he had Kat over a lot of the time, and well, it was rather obvious I was the third wheel, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah, can imagine," Marlie grinned. "Sorry about that. Sounds fun."

"Well, there's always next year," said Deanna. "I compensated by learning how to use your phone and calling Luella every other day. Good thing Mum's given me my own Gringotts account really, I think I ran up a small fortune in phone bills."

"Yes, she called me so often, my mum and dad have started answering the phone as 'Luella Martin's answering service' now," Luella remarked. "I've never seen them so pleased to see me off. Honestly, I'm their beloved only child and they want to get rid of me after two weeks. Anyone would think they didn't like me or something. Which, after all the trouble they went to having me, is rather weird when you think about it."

"They went to trouble to have you?" said Marlie, frowning.

"Oh yeah. They'd been married for five years before I was born. They'd just about given up on ever having kids, then I turn up out of the blue, two months premature and fighting for life. Apparently I was in an incubator for weeks, and it was touch and go whether I'd make it at one point. You know, if I hadn't had magic, hadn't been a witch, I don't know if I'd have survived." Luella's face became sombre as she said this, pondering what might have been... Until her best friend ruined the mood.

"And the effects of this on her developing brain have been with us ever since." Deanna swiftly retreated to a safe distance, grinning at Luella, even as the other witch glared at her.

"You know, if you weren't my best mate, I'd be giving you a slap round about now..." Luella threatened her.

"Sorry, Lu. You know I love you really." Deanna darted closer, wearing her most ingratiating smile and leaning her head on Luella's shoulder. "Forgive me?"

"Suppose so," Luella muttered, flinging an arm around her and giving her a quick hug. She glanced up at the other two girls, smiling. "Ooh, guess what! We have gossip!"

"You have?" All other troubles were instantly forgotten as both Marlie and Rianne fell in beside Luella and Deanna, attentive to every word as they made their way back inside. "Do tell!"

"Yep," Deanna nodded. "We have weird news on Malfoy."

"Malfoy, eh?" Rianne asked, intrigued. "What's he done now?"

"He was being... nice." Deanna shuddered. "Creepy."

"Nice to you, you mean. He practically ignored me," said Luella. "Although it's an improvement on him calling me 'Mudblood' all the time."

"So why was he being nice to Deanna then?" asked Marlie, frowning. "And what was he saying?"

"That's the strange thing," said Luella. "Bugger all. Just chitchat. He comes into our compartment on his own, and at first he just shuffles about a bit, until Deanna snaps at him to get the hell on with it if he wants to talk to us, or bugger off. Funnily enough, he actually smiles a bit at that and asks if he can sit down. So Deanna says, if you must. So Draco parks his bum on the seats, and sits there, before talking about the weather. Well, me and Deanna look at him, then each other, then him again, then I tell him 'Malfoy, did you have a reason for being here, or is being an annoying pain in the arse it?' Well, that got a reaction. He glares at me, and says, 'I can make friendly conversation with my housemates, can't I?'"

"Which is where I say, 'Yes, but it goes against all our previous experience with you'", Deanna said, taking up the narrative. "Then he actually looks at me and *smiles*."

"God, how revolting," said Marlie, quite disgusted. "Then what?"

"Draco tells us he has news he'd like to share with us, which is about the only thing he could have said that would have stopped me throwing him out," said Deanna. "You know that Hippogriff that bit him last term?"

"Yeah, we remember," said Rianne, smiling at the memory, not least because she'd faced the beast in question and found it, if not harmless,

then friendly at least. "When I'm rich, I'm gonna take that animal and give it free food for life."

Marlie, remembering Draco's as-good-as admission that he'd provoked it deliberately, and her conversation with Narcissa before Christmas, said nothing. This was going to be interesting, with the hearing due in days. Had Narcissa discovered some way of averting disaster?

"Well, you know it was going up before the governors as part of an official inquiry?" Luella grinned. "Well, turns out it's not now. Someone nicked it over the holidays. They can't find it anywhere."

"Nicked it?" Marlie raised an eyebrow. "Sure Hagrid didn't let it go?"

Deanna shook her head. "No; whoever did it used a Severing Charm, and Hagrid apparently can't cast them. It's all really mysterious. There's no one with with skill, opportunity and motive who could have done it. Everyone's really puzzled, even the DDAE. I'll have to write to Mum, see what she says."

"But whoever did it, the inquiry's been called off," Luella explained. "If there's no Hippogriff, nothing can be done, and Malfoy's dad has apparently given up. I don't think he was happy about it, but Draco reckons his mum doesn't want the hassle."

"Malfoy himself, on the other hand, seemed rather pleased about the whole thing," said Deanna, looking at Marlie knowingly. "Odd, isn't it, how he's the one that got mauled, but he's pleased it got away?"

Marlie sagged in relief. One less thing to worry about. Or at least, it would have been had she not had a very good idea who'd been responsible, but there was no point thinking about that now.

"Not really," she confessed. "Seeing as how he provoked it on purpose to get injured and thrown off the team."

"What??"

"No way!"

"Yes way. Apparently his mum wanted me to get my place back, and told him to find a way. He couldn't resign honestly because of what his dad would say, but he could get injured and sidelined with no problems. So he did, but he didn't reckon on his dad going up the wall and threatening legal action. He's been stressing all term about it - he didn't want the Hippogriff to die. So he's pleased because it's finally all over and he can forget about it."

She noticed that all three of her friends were staring at her, their minds thoroughly boggled. Come to think about it, it did sound a bit crazy when you thought about it...

"Marls," said Deanna after a short pause. "Your family is mad."

Weeks passed, and before long, the hurt caused by lack of Sirius began to fade. It wasn't that Marlie stopped missing him, but with all her friends back, and lessons and Quidditch to think about, she didn't have time to miss him. Rianne had had a word with Luella and Deanna along the lines of perhaps they'd all been neglecting Marlie a bit, and the other two were going out of their way to spend more time with her, when they weren't on Prefect duty anyway. Deanna had also begun private tuition with Professor Lupin, learning how to repel Dementors. It apparently involved heading out to Hogsmeade every Friday ("because unlike some, we're not all lucky enough to have Dementors as our Boggarts, and besides, it's the only bloody chance I'll get to see the place this year") and practising the Patronus Charm on real Dementors, before retreating inside the Three Broomsticks for medicinal Butterbeer and chocolate.

"So let me get this straight," said Luella after Deanna returned from the first lesson, looking absolutely shattered. "You shoot a few hexes around, then Professor Lupin takes you to the pub and gives you free drinks and chocolate."

"Well, if you want to put it like that," Deanna grumbled, irritated that she was not getting the sympathy she'd hoped for. Hearing Lily scream at

Voldemort, her mother kissing her and telling her to be a good girl for her auntie, the psychotic dark-haired female Death Eater describe in vivid detail how they'd killed James, and Caitlin savagely hissing "If she's dead, so are they!", was not her idea of a fun evening. She'd not managed a single successful Patronus yet.

"Free drinks and chocolate?" Marlie asked, suddenly very interested. "Hey, can I come?"

"You don't need lessons, Marls, they don't affect you like they do the rest of us," Rianne pointed out. "You're practically immune to everything bar the Kiss."

"Yeah, but I could still do with learning the charm though..."

"The charm's easy," Deanna sighed. "Professor Lupin couldn't believe his eyes when I cast it just fine in the classroom but was on my knees when the Dementors turned up. It took three goes and as many Butterbeers before I could even stay standing."

"Ah yes, alcohol," Rianne announced, with a wink at Luella. "Insulating people from harsh reality since Bacchus was a lad."

"Shut it, you, the beer had nothing to do with it. I'll have you know Professor Lupin thinks I'm doing really well, given the trauma level involved."

"And you had the nerve to imply I was mentally deficient at the start of term..."

"Look, Lu, I've already apologised. Can you just let it go? You're weird because you were born too soon, and I'm screwed up because my father's a rapist, my stepdad turned out to be a murdering psychopath and my mother's an alcoholic depressive who spent most of my childhood neglecting me. Can we call it quits?"

"Yeah, suppose," Luella looked at Deanna and smiled. "You know I love you really."

Deanna looked away, a bittersweet smile on her face. "Yeah, I know," she said softly.

Marlie, feeling she'd missed something in all this, looked over at Rianne. The other girl met her gaze and winked. Which told her absolutely bugger all, except possibly that she needed to start hanging around her friends a bit more.

Fortunately for Marlie, her own lessons with Lupin proved not to be as traumatic as she'd thought. Lupin had looked at her strangely, and kept giving her odd glances all through their first Defence lesson, but beyond that, nothing had happened, and Marlie had soon been able to forget what had happened over the holidays. The only really bad time was the Quidditch match against Ravenclaw, when Marlie scanned the stands, hoping against hope that Sirius had come to see her fly... but it was not to be. Saddened, Marlie was off her game, and Slytherin only won by ten points, thanks to a lucky shot from Laetitia Vetinari just as the Snitch finally fell into Marlie's grasp. Still, a win was still a win when all was said and done, and the resulting party was no less raucous as a result.

She still slipped off to Gryffindor when she could, trying to stalk Wormtail, without success. The rat was cunning, and Ron was extremely paranoid whenever she was around. Who would have thought such Slytherin characteristics could be found in a pair of Gryffindors? The irony was not lost on her.

And then came the breakthrough. Gryffindor security had been heightened, with passwords changing daily. For most, this hadn't been a problem, but if you were Neville Longbottom, with a memory of sieve-like proportions, and a habit of rushing out in the morning because of never being able to find your stuff, and without a group of more organised friends to remind you of the password, this was catastrophic. After the third time in a week he'd been locked out of the common room, Neville had finally decided that the only way to avoid this was to get the week's passwords off the new portrait, Sir Cadogan, and write

them down. The Fat Lady would never have sanctioned this, but as Neville told Ron and Harry, Sir Cadogan wasn't the Fat Lady, was he?

Marlie, curled up unnoticed on Hermione's lap, concealed by the desk and more books on one table than Marlie had in her entire dorm room, pricked up one ear at this, twisting it in Neville's direction, rather relieved that his voice hadn't really broken yet, as the higher pitch made it easier for cat ears to pick up. So Neville had a list of passwords, did he? One good for the whole week? Oh, how Sirius would love this... Except Sirius wasn't here any more, was he? Marlie felt her heart sink as she remembered that everything was different now, and that Sirius was not waiting in the Shack, waiting for news and the opportunity to strike. Sirius was who knew where. Sirius might not even be in the country any more - she was under no illusions as to where the missing Hippogriff had gone. He'd always liked animals, hated seeing them tied up, was prone to walking off with anything he had a particular need for and the owner didn't and had spent many long hours describing the petty criminality of his youth. It was asking too much to leave a large winged animal tied up where Sirius Black in need of a lift might find it.

Rianne soon confirmed this when Marlie spoke to her about it.

"Yeah, it was him," Rianne sighed. "He's got the thing living in the corner of his cave. Lets it out at night, sometimes even takes a ride himself. Reckons it's very therapeutic. Well, he can't masturbate, eat and sleep all the time, I suppose."

Marlie tried very hard to get rid of the images that particular phrase brought up, but without much success.

"So you know where he is? You've seen him?" she gasped. "Rianne, why didn't you tell me?"

"You never asked," Rianne pointed out. "Besides, he asked me not to say. He wanted to be alone. So unless you've got a pressing reason to see him, you're going nowhere."

Marlie just smiled a Mona Lisa smile. If she'd been in her cat form, she'd have been purring.

"I can get him into Gryffindor."

"OK, that counts as a pressing reason," said Rianne, her voice faint. She'd evidently not expected that. "Mind telling me how?"

"One of the Gryffindors can never remember the passwords and has a list of them. All I have to do is sneak in and take them while he's not looking, then give it to Sirius. Then we go in, get the rat, and Sirius... is free." Her voice softened as she said this, hope flowering again, in a space where the ground had been stony for so long. *Once he's free, it's safe for me to see him, he won't have to hide any more, and... maybe he'll come back to me.*

"Don't count on it," said Rianne softly. "The man is stubborn. But I do agree, you have to try."

"So you'll tell me where he is?" Marlie asked hopefully. Rianne nodded, sketching Marlie a map.

"He's in a cave, halfway up this mountain. You'll recognise it by the overhang with moss growing on it. It's about thirty miles away, but it shouldn't take you long on your Firebolt. Go on Friday night, while Deanna's at her Dementor lesson. I'll get Lu out of the way for you." Rianne fixed Marlie with an intent stare. "Don't screw this up. If you want your boyfriend to walk free, you two need to work together. That means no arguing, no fussing, no fighting, just the two of you combining your pragmatism and cunning with his magical skills and strength. You both need to be in on this or it will go tits up, and you might not get a chance as good as this one again. Do you understand me?"

"Yeah, I get you," said Marlie, shaken by Rianne's intensity. Was the situation really that bad? She hadn't thought so, yet Rianne's attitude seemed to indicate otherwise. Well, if she had to work with Sirius to free him, she was quite willing. But would Sirius agree to work with her

again? As she pocketed the map, Marlie could only pray that Sirius let his common sense overrule his stubbornness for once... but she wasn't hopeful.

"That was rubbish," Deanna groaned, her head resting on the bar of the Three Broomsticks. "God, I'm never going to manage this bloody spell, am I?"

"It was nothing of the kind," said Lupin, offering her a Butterbeer. "You're doing very well."

"Yes, after a few drinks, I can stay upright," Deanna sighed. "I'm no expert, but isn't alcohol meant to have the opposite effect?"

"Don't be like that," Lupin scolded her, although one side of his mouth had quirked upwards at her words. "For someone who was passing out or going catatonic at the mere presence of a Dementor only a few months back, you're doing astonishingly well." He noticed the scepticism on her face. "Really."

"I still can't summon my Patronus when they're around though," Deanna pointed out. "Given that this was meant to be the entire point of the exercise, I'd say I'm not doing that well."

"I won't deny you have some work to do," Lupin admitted. "But you're thinking about this in very black and white terms, Deanna. That if you haven't succeeded, you've failed utterly. It doesn't have to be that way, you know. There is such a thing as partial success, you know."

"Try telling that to my mum," Deanna scowled.

"I will if I have to," said Lupin. His expression turned serious. "Listen, I promised to teach you to the best of both our abilities, and I will. But if you can't do it, then it's not the end of the world. And if your mother complains, just send her to me. I'm not afraid of her."

Deanna did laugh at that. "You don't know her that well, do you?" she remarked.

"On the contrary, I count her as a friend," Lupin replied. "And this I do know - you're no trophy child. She cares about you, and she wants you to be able to protect yourself. If you think she's going to love you any less if you can't do this, you're the one who doesn't know her that well."

Deanna's expression seemed to say that she thought exactly that.

"I don't want to disappoint her," Deanna whispered. "I don't want her to think I'm weak. I need to be strong, I want to be an Auror for her..."

"You want to be an Auror for her?" Lupin asked, frowning. "Deanna, while I'm not trying to talk you out of your chosen career, don't you think you should be doing it for yourself? It's a very high risk job. You shouldn't be going in to it if you don't truly want to do it. I'm sure your mother won't disown you if you want to do something else."

"I don't want to do anything else!" Deanna snapped. Realising who she was talking to, she swiftly backtracked. "I'm sorry, sir, I didn't mean to snap at you. But I want to do this. I really do."

"You want to make her proud," Lupin finished for her.

"Yeah," Deanna whispered.

"You're afraid part of her doesn't really love you."

"Sir, I know it doesn't," Deanna sighed. "I don't know if you know her past, but she's had a really bad time of it. She lost so much because of me, I don't want her to regret having me any more than she already does."

"She doesn't regret it," Lupin heard himself say.

"And you'd know this how?" Deanna raised an eyebrow at him.

"I just do," said Lupin, shrugging. "She wants you safe, that I do know. When it comes right down to it, you are her child, and she loves you. She would trade her life for yours if she had to."

Deanna didn't answer. Toying with her Butterbeer, she knocked the rest of the honey-warm liquid back down, before getting up.

"Come on," she said, her voice rough. "Let's do this one more time."

"Are you sure?" Lupin asked, surprised. She certainly didn't look ready to be facing Dementors again so soon.

Deanna did not reply, striding outside. Fighting panic, Lupin raced after her, prepared to step in if necessary.

He found Deanna outside, kneeling on the ground, huddled up. Already a patrolling Dementor had detached itself and was examining her closely. In the light from the pub, Lupin could see that Deanna had her eyes closed. However, although she was not smiling, there was something oddly composed about her. She was not happy... but she wasn't scared either.

Deanna for her part was lost in her memories again, reliving that long ago Halloween, every moment as clear as if it were yesterday. But it hadn't been yesterday, and she'd heard it all so often this last month, it was starting to get repetitive. Deanna watched it play out, feeling oddly detached from everything. *Yeah, yeah, get on with it.* She waited, slightly impatient, until the memory reached the point she'd been waiting for. The part that Lupin's last remark had reminded her of. The part that was going to fuel her Patronus and turn the Dementor's power back on itself. Ah yes, here it came...

"You be a good girl for your auntie now." Caitlin's voice caressed her ears in a tender whisper, the words of one who was not sure they would ever meet again. In fact, Deanna was by now certain Caitlin had *not* expected to survive. But she had, and her next words, although consciously unremembered, had lingered in Deanna's psyche, getting

her through the bad times to come. *"Remember, Mummy loves you very much, even if she didn't always show it."*

Deanna could almost feel her mother kiss her goodbye. *She would have died to see me to safety. She meant to die. It's pure ironic luck it wasn't Lily bringing me up. She would have died to see me safe from harm. And she still would.*

Deanna's eyes flicked open as she aimed her wand at the Dementor. *"Expecto Patronum."*

The silver falcon sprang out, a far cry from the merest silver puffs she'd managed so far. This was a full-blooded Patronus, and it worked magnificently. Shrieking, the Dementor fell back, trying to hide as the silver bird drove it off. Deanna watched, a small smile flickering on her face, feeling too exhausted to do anything more.

"I did it," she whispered, feeling her head spin. She would have collapsed had Lupin not strode forward and caught her.

"You did indeed." He helped her up, one arm around her shoulders. "Come on, let's get you inside, it's cold out here."

Deanna nodded, holding on to him for support and letting herself be led in to the warm and welcoming lights of the pub.

"I did it, Professor," she gasped again, the realisation sinking in. "I really did it!"

"Yes, you did. God alone knows how, but you did. Well done!" Lupin gave her a hug before he could stop himself. "Your mother's going to be very proud of you, you know. Not that she isn't already, but she's going to be even prouder."

"Yeah," Deanna whispered, eyes shining as she imagined her mother's reaction on hearing this news. "Yeah, she is."

Meanwhile, far above Hogsmeade, a shadow with long blonde hair swept across the sky. Marlie was flying out, having successfully purloined Neville Longbottom's list of passwords. Now all she had to do was find Sirius and get him to co-operate. Of course, this was easier said than done.

After a few wrong turnings and false leads - Rianne had many talents, but cartography was not one of them - Marlie finally found the place she was looking for. She could sense that there was, or had been, magic here, although it was only a trace. Far stronger, however, was the unmistakeable, to cat senses, smell of Hippogriff. This was the place alright. Landing, Marlie shrank her Firebolt and made her way inside, using wandlight and enhanced vision to see the way.

The cave appeared completely ordinary... and deserted. Still, it stretched some way back into the mountain, and Sirius wouldn't want his presence to be obvious. He'd probably used magic of some kind to conceal his hideout.

Which he had. What Marlie hadn't thought of was that he'd also have put up a few wards and Security Charms. Even now, dozens of undetectable spells were assessing her, weighing up her age, species and magical skills, and coming to a decision regarding her threat level. Before she even knew anything was wrong, red light had flashed out, striking her in the back of the head. Crumpling to the ground, Marlie lay still.

When she came round, it was to relative warmth and light, and a comfy surface underneath her that felt strangely like a leather sofa. More disconcerting however was the dark figure leaning over her, stroking her hair back.

"Wha-?" she gasped, trying to clear her head. Instinctively, she tried to find her wand, wondering where she'd put it.

"Looking for this?"

Marlie's fear disappeared. She knew that voice, had heard those exact words before. Except this time, the wand was not being used against her, but pressed into her hand, as Sirius Black moved away, watching her grimly, all affection gone from him. It was as if they'd never even been friends, never mind anything else.

"What happened?" Marlie whispered, still feeling dazed.

"You set the wards off. They're programmed to stun anyone who comes in and alert me. I recognised your magical signature and came and got you." He folded his arms, glaring. "Marlie, what are you doing here? Didn't I tell you not to come after me?"

"Yeah, but..." She faltered, the stony expression on his face throwing her. When did Sirius Black, warm, impulsive, affectionate Gryffindor that he was, become so cold? "I - I thought..."

"Thought what? That I'd be pleased to see you? That I'd welcome you in with open arms?" Sirius barked out a laugh at that. "You thought wrong, kitten."

"But..."

"But what? What did you think you were to me? Friend? Ally? I hope to God it wasn't boyfriend."

Marlie did not reply. She was too busy holding back the tears and trying to keep her heart from breaking all over again.

"Marlie, all you are to me is one more complication in my already far too complicated life." He leaned in close to her, eyes inches from hers. "I don't need you. Go back to school."

"And if I don't want to?" Marlie said, feeling reckless. Anger was an excellent anaesthetic, she found.

"Then you'll found yourself thrown out on your ear, and I can guarantee you will not be able to get back in." Something in him softened, seeing

the stunned expression on her face. "Go on, go. You've got a normal life to go back to; make the most of it. We don't all have that luxury."

Marlie could contain her fury no more.

"I don't want a normal life!" she yelled at him. "I wanted you!"

And finally she got an emotional reaction out of him. Sirius flinched, before getting up and walking away. He wouldn't even look at her now, leaning his head against the far wall. When he did speak again, his voice was barely above a whisper.

"Marls. Go home. Please." Marlie had heard many things from Sirius but she'd never really heard him beg. Still, anything was better than the coldness she'd seen before. Seizing the opportunity, she got up and slid behind him, resting her head on his back. Without even thinking about it, her hands slid to his hips as she closed her eyes, feeling part of the ache in her heart start to fade.

"You still need me, Padfoot," she whispered. "Come on, come back with me. Come back to the Shrieking Shack. I'll help you, we can do this, we can free you-"

"No," Sirius cut in. "We can't. I mean it, Marls, I'm not risking your life like this."

"Too late," Marlie murmured. "Consider it risked." Her hands began to move of their own accord, sliding down his hips and inwards, as her entire body pressed up against his. Marlie gasped as he leant back into her, his head tilting back and his hair falling down, so close she could rub her face in it if she wanted.

"Padfoot," she moaned softly, her pelvis starting to grind up against him. He was responding, she could feel it, a groan escaping his lips as her fingers met in the middle over ill-concealed evidence of his arousal. Not long now, not long and he'd be on his knees for her... As one hand stayed teasing him, the other snuck upwards, fingers worming their way under his shirt.

Sirius cried out sharply, before snatching at her wrist, spinning around and out of her embrace, breathing heavily and staring at her, pain etched on his face.

"No!" he whispered, shaking his head. "No, no, no, no! Not again! It was wrong last time, it's not going to happen again!"

Marlie struggled to free herself, mind still dazed by visions of naked Sirius on his knees, pushing her up against a wall and diving under her robes.

"Why are you fighting this?" she murmured, her voice hungry for more. "You want it, I know you want it, just stop fighting it and it can be yours, all yours, everything you ever wanted..."

Sirius flung her away, sending her crashing into the sofa. "Stop it!" he screamed, covering his ears with his hands and closing his eyes. "Stop it, stop it, stop! Just stop! Please."

Marlie dragged herself into a sitting position, watching him with concern. What was wrong with him? She'd never seen him like this before. It was like he was scared or something. Scared... of her.

"Sirius?" she asked. "Are you alright?"

"Do I fucking look it?" he snapped, still refusing to look at her. Marlie shrank back. Her instincts told her that he was best left alone in this state.

"Is there anything I can do?" she said softly, knowing already that the answer would be no, that this wasn't something she could cure... that her being here was causing this.

"No," Sirius snapped. "Apart from getting out of here and not coming back."

"You don't mean that," Marlie whispered, fighting the tears prickling at her eyes. But no, she would not cry here, not in front of him. She wouldn't give him that victory.

"I fucking do." The hate in his voice was too much to bear. She didn't dare look at him now.

"Fine," she snapped, trying her best to hold her voice steady, not entirely successfully. Getting to her feet, she reached into her pocket for the list of passwords. If he wanted to go it alone, so be it. "Here. This is for you; I found it in Gryffindor Tower." She tossed it at his feet. "It's a list of all the passwords for the Gryffindor common room for this week. There's a new portrait there now, not the Fat Lady. Sir Cadogan, I think it is. He'll let you in probably. I was going to go with you, but seeing as I'm just another complication to worry about, well, it's probably best you do it without me."

Sirius had picked the paper up and was looking it over. He lifted his eyes and looked at her again, the hate gone, although there was still a wariness there.

"Marlie, wait," he began. But it was too late for a reconciliation now. Marlie had her limits, and she could be stubborn too.

"No, you wanted me gone?" Marlie waved him away. "Don't worry. I'm going." Without another word, she turned and left, leaving Sirius staring at the parchment, wondering where things went from here.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Opportunities Missed and Taken

"Wake up."

Rianne's voice sliced into Marlie's sleep like a knife, and it had every bit of the same sharpness.

"Don't wanna," Marlie muttered, trying to put it all off for just a bit longer. She'd slipped straight into bed after returning from Sirius, trying to avoid the inevitable fight for as long as she could. However, it seemed time had run out. Rianne was not to be denied.

"Tough." Marlie felt the covers ripped away. "We need to talk. Now."

"Rianne," Marlie whined, scrabbling blindly for blankets that weren't there, shivering in the chill dungeon air. Rianne grabbed her by the shoulder and spun her on to her back, glaring at her.

"What happened?" Rianne hissed. "Did you two argue again?"

Marlie shut her eyes. She so was not in the mood for this.

"Well? Did you?"

"Yes, alright, we argued," Marlie snapped. "I'm sorry, all right? Anyway, he started it. He told me to go home, he didn't need me. Apparently I'm just another complication in his already complicated life. Bastard." Marlie forced back the tears prickling at her eyes as she recalled the words he'd flung at her the night before.

"And you took him at his word, and walked out."

"Yeah."

"But you left the password list with him."

"Yeah. Said if he wanted to go it alone, he was more than welcome." Marlie noticed Rianne groaning, her head in her hands. "What? What's up, Ri?"

"Marls. What did I specifically tell you, both of you, I might add, that you had to do or it would all go tits-up?"

"Er... that we had to work together?" said Marlie sheepishly.

"Exactly. And what do you do?"

"But it wasn't my fault, Sirius was being such a prat..." Marlie began, but her voice trailed off under Rianne's glare.

"I clearly remember telling you both," said Rianne, enunciating every word very carefully, lest there be any doubt as to her meaning, "that you had to work as a team, or it would all go horribly wrong. That if either of you tried it alone, it'd blow up in your faces. Didn't I, Marls?"

"Um. Yeah," Marlie admitted. "But I'll go back if you like, try and talk some sense into him, he might have mellowed a bit..." She noticed the hollow fury in Rianne's eyes, anger underlined with weariness and despair. "Maybe not?"

Rianne shook her head. "It's too late, Marls," she sighed.

"Too late..." Marlie finally realised what Rianne had been hinting at. "Oh no. Please tell me he didn't."

Rianne nodded, clearly exasperated with the pair of them. "That's right. He did. *Your bloody boyfriend* broke into Gryffindor last night. And true to form, without anyone with a bit of sense there to give him a hand, he ballsed it up royally."

"Oh god." Marlie placed a hand to her mouth, remembering what had happened last time Sirius had gone up against Pettigrew on his own. Twelve dead Muggles that she didn't know was bad enough. Dead schoolmates caught up in the crossfire was infinitely worse. "Is... is everyone alright?"

"No one died, if that's what you mean," said Rianne tersely. "But Ron Weasley got the shock of his life waking up to find Sirius Black leaning over him with a great big carving knife stuck in his belt. Although it's probably a good thing the knife was there - it seems to have distracted Ron from the fact that Sirius has a wand again, and was looking just a bit too clean and well-dressed for a fugitive on the run."

"Oh my god," Marlie whispered, horrified. "Is Sirius all right?"

"Yeah, he had the good sense to leg it when Ron started screaming. Ron's all right too, by the way. Thanks for asking."

"What? Oh. Yeah. Right. Of course. Ron. Yeah." Marlie ignored Rianne's eye roll as something occurred to her. "Hey, how'd you know all this anyway? Sight?"

"No. Gossip. It's nine thirty in the morning, the whole of Gryffindor House has been out of bed ever since your moron boytoy made his presence known, and Ron Weasley is telling anyone who'll listen how he frightened Sirius Black off all by himself." Rianne folded her arms.

"Congratulations, Marls, you've both managed to completely screw up your best chance of freeing Sirius."

"They're not going to let Neville Longbottom write the new passwords down, are they?" Marlie realised.

"No. And they've replaced Sir Cadogan with a pair of trolls. No, not portrait trolls. Real trolls. Good luck getting Sirius past *those*."

"Fuck." Marlie sank back against the pillows, thoroughly demoralised. All that hard work, down the drain. All because she'd been too easily angered and Sirius had been too damn noble and stubborn to accept help.

"It gets worse."

"How?" Marlie sighed. Unless... A horrible thought struck her. "They've not caught him, have they?" The thought was too frightening to contemplate. She had no illusions that the Aurors would show him any mercy, especially not if Caitlin was among them.

"No," said Rianne, and Marlie let out a breath she'd not realised she'd been holding. "But if they do, it will go worse for Sirius than you can even imagine, and you'll lose him forever." Rianne held out a copy of the *Daily Prophet*, and Marlie noticed, to her surprise, that Rianne's hands were trembling.

"Ri?" she whispered, taking the paper off her. "What is this?"

"I'm sorry, Marls," said Rianne softly. "But I thought I'd better break it to you while you were alone. It's really not good."

Marlie, now really worried, opened the paper up... and let it fall from her fingers, numbness freezing her grip. Spread out in front of her, one of Sirius's Wanted pictures was topped by a headline that chilled her blood. It read simply: **"BLACK SENTENCED TO DEMENTOR'S KISS"**.

Preoccupied as the whole school was with Sirius Black's latest incursion, no one noticed a small, fluffy white cat dart out from the Slytherin dungeons and dash out of the school before pausing outside, sniffing the air and hunting purposefully for a scent. The cat paced this way and that, nose to the ground, before it found what it was looking for. Glancing around to check it wasn't being watched, the cat darted off again, keeping to a wellworn and all too familiar path that took it around the very base of the castle, all the way to a certain tree near a wall with far fewer windows than most.

Without missing a beat, the cat dived under the branches of the Whomping Willow, narrowly missed being sent flying by one of them and hit a certain knot on one of the roots. The cat utterly failed to be surprised as the tree froze and a passageway opened up beneath. Diving inside with the practised ease of one who'd done this many

times before, the cat disappeared, the passageway closing up behind it as the tree resumed its thrashing.

And as the cat reached the end of the passageway, it metamorphosed into a blonde witch who clambered up the ladder that was there, pushed through the trapdoor in the roof and came face to face with a large black mongrel dog, spread out on the single brown leather sofa that was the only piece of furniture left in the room and staring into the distance looking utterly lost

Marlie stared at the dog. The dog stared back, surprised... but not hostile. Marlie said nothing, just biting her lip as she wondered what madness had driven her to come after him. She'd only stopped to get dressed and brush her hair before shrinking the newspaper, pocketing it and transforming, hoping she'd still be able to pick up his scent. She hadn't thought he'd go far, and she'd been right. But now she'd found him and confirmed he was safe... now what? She didn't think she could take it if he threw her out again.

The dog shimmered as skin shifted and dog became man, and Sirius Black was sitting up, watching her in amazement.

"Marls?" he said, frowning. "What are you doing here?" But the coldness he'd shown when they'd spoken last night was absent, and it was almost as if they'd never argued. It all sounded so utterly normal... and the sheer normality was what broke Marlie. He was looking at her very strangely, but the cold, uncaring stranger of last night was gone. This was her Sirius, she could feel it. The Sirius who she'd laughed with, joked with, chatted to, been driven up the wall by. The Sirius who had held her in his arms, kissed her and made love to her. Who, for

just a few all-too-brief minutes, had laid in her arms, utterly undone, utterly hers. It was too much. To think of Padfoot, her Padfoot, lying in the Incurable Ward at St. Mungo's, or worse, slung back into an Azkaban cell to die, staring into space, eyes blank, soul destroyed, never able to laugh or smile ever again, never able to hold her, whisper her name, with not even the hope of being reunited with him when she died... no, it was too much to bear.

"Sirius..." she managed, before it all overwhelmed her, and she began to sob. "Oh god, Sirius!" She staggered over to him and flung her arms around him, sobbing into his shoulder, resting her head against his chest, the muscles beneath offering the illusion of safety and protection, an illusion she still wanted to cling to even though she knew that Sirius could not even protect himself, never mind her. *I don't want to lose you, I care about you, oh god, Sirius, how can you just act so normally when they're planning to suck out your soul!*

Sirius hadn't said a word, hadn't even moved. No doubt he was probably wondering if she'd gone mad. Marlie was wondering the same thing herself... but she knew that if Sirius Black's soul was eaten, forever annihilated by the Dementors, she'd never be able to get over it. Howling into his shoulder seemed entirely reasonable under the circumstances, and if she wanted to act like a raving banshee, then she was going to, damnit!

"Kitten," she heard him whisper, and then strong fingers were smoothing her hair back, an arm was curling around her waist and she found herself drawn into his arms, perched on Sirius Black's lap and nestled up against the woollen fabric of his Muggle jumper.

"Don't cry, babe," he whispered, and his voice sounded near breaking too. "Please, kitten. Please don't cry."

The softness of his voice and the gentle way he was stroking her hair only undid her further. Marlie buried her face in his chest and howled. *Oh god, Sirius, don't be like this, don't be so bloody caring, you're only reminding me why I can't bear to lose you!*

Sirius tightened his grip on her. "Oh god, kitten, don't!" he pleaded. "Stop it, please, don't do this to me! Please. I hate seeing you upset, you know I do, please." He was clutching at her, helplessly willing her to stop crying. It was to no avail. How was he to know that the gentler he was, the more she couldn't bear to lose him?

"At least talk to me, babe," he said, desperation in every syllable. "Tell me what's wrong. Please?"

Marlie shook her head, barely able to speak. "Can't," she sobbed. "You... oh god, Padfoot!" She burrowed closer into his chest, trying to surround herself with the feel of taut muscles under soft fabric, the smell of Sirius Black invading her senses, musky, hot, slightly dangerous, very passionate, all male. She'd forgotten how intoxicating it actually was. "Need you," she whimpered, in a voice so small even she could barely hear it. But Sirius heard, and finally he understood, as he adjusted his embrace and held her even closer.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I... I've been such an arsehole to you, haven't I? I am so sorry, Marls. I really am. Please... please don't cry. Please."

Marlie could almost have laughed. Now he was sorry? Apart from it being far too late now, the deep irony was that she'd forgotten she'd hated him as soon as she'd seen that headline. She shook her head, despairing both of Sirius, and of life's ability to ever do what you wanted it to.

Sirius misinterpreted the gesture. He buried his head in her hair and she heard him choke something back that might have been a sob.

"I've fucked everything up, haven't I?" she heard him gasp. His cheek was resting against the side of her face, and Marlie could feel dampness on her skin that wasn't from her own eyes. "I've ruined everything. Typical me, really, everything good in my life, everything I touch, I manage to go and screw up totally. First my family get wiped out because I joined the Aurors, then I get my second family ruined by trusting Wormtail, then I really screw things up by going after Wormtail on my own and not getting your mum to help me, and then I go and make the same mistake *again* and push you away." He stopped, inhaling sharply as he held on to her as if his life depended on it. "I've been such a fool, kitten."

"You can say that again," Marlie whispered. She should, she supposed, be pleased at this - the man who'd walked out on her was now in her arms, sobbing his heart out and admitting he'd been an idiot. What had seemed supremely smugness-inducing in fantasy was far less gratifying in reality, it turned out. It was a hollow victory indeed, achieved when it was far too late to make a difference.

"Suppose you heard about what happened last night then?" said Sirius halfheartedly, already knowing the answer. What else would have brought her here after all?

"Rianne told me," said Marlie, her tears having subsided, leaving an empty ache in their place. "Apparently Ron Weasley's been telling everyone how he squared up to Sirius Black and survived."

"Yeah, that sounds about right," Sirius sighed. "I could see Pettigrew curled up on the pillow, he was right there and I was just about to grab him when the little bugger woke up, saw me, squeaked and bit Ron's ear. Kid woke up, took one look at me leaning over him and screamed the place down. Woke all the others up, and no way am I taking on five teenage wizards with the rest of Gryffindor probably about to burst in any minute, and an Animagus Death Eater on the loose as well. Even I know when I'm outnumbered." He was staring off into the distance, eyes empty despite the tears still wet on his cheeks. "It was our best chance, kitten. I almost had him, you know? If I'd been a bit quicker..."

"If you'd stunned the other kids in the dorm and cast a Silencing spell over Ron first," said Marlie softly. Sirius laughed.

"See? I didn't even think of doing that. They're only kids, it didn't feel right casting spells on them. That's what Rianne meant - you should have been there because you think of these things. You're smart. And sneaky. And unhindered by things like ethics and principles and fair play."

"Damn right," Marlie murmured, grinning despite herself. Sirius smiled, ruffling her hair as he placed a light kiss on the top of her head. And Marlie, remembering, froze.

What did you think I was to you? Friend? Ally? I hope to god it wasn't boyfriend.

"Sirius, no, I-" Marlie began, anger slowly starting to rise again. *No, no, no, I will not get drawn in again, I will not let you hurt me again!*

Sirius had stopped, catching his breath. "Marls," he whispered. "I'm sorry." He backed off, letting her go. "Can you ever forgive me?" He was staring at his hands, not meeting her eyes.

"You practically laughed in my face last night," Marlie reminded him, pain making her sharp despite, or perhaps because of, how vulnerable he looked at that moment. "You said you didn't need me, I was just another complication. You reckoned I was just some silly schoolgirl with a stupid crush on you, and I was just in the way." She felt oddly pleased when he winced at her words... but her pleasure vanished at his.

"I was wrong." This was said so quietly Marlie barely heard him. "I do need you. I thought I could do it alone, thought you'd be better off without me, thought you'd be safer without me. But... I was wrong, wasn't I? You're not better off, I can't do this alone, and somehow I have the feeling you're quite capable of getting yourself in danger without me." This last was said with the slightest hint of a smile. "It's probably best I stick around, you know? Keep an eye on you. If you're

going to get yourself in trouble, I think I'd rather be there to help you get out of it again."

"Sirius," Marlie breathed, hating the way her eyes started to fill with tears again. *It's too late, damn you, why couldn't you have said all this back in December?* "I'm sorry, I... I can't..." She choked on the words, knowing she'd only start crying again if she spoke the dreaded phrase *I can't be your girlfriend* out loud.

Sirius nodded, eyes closed. "It's alright, I understand, kitten. I wasn't really expecting you to turn around and say it was all OK again. I just..." *Wished you had.* But Sirius did not dare say it out loud. Marlie wasn't the only one at risk of bursting into tears if they weren't careful what they said.

Marlie bit her lip, feeling her emotions clogging her throat. Damn the man. He could he just sit there, looking so bloody *hurt* and... and *vulnerable*, and just *accepting* it all as entirely his fault and all he was entitled to? She whispered his name again, and as he turned to face her, she slid into his arms again and pulled him to her, resting her head on his shoulder and stroking his hair, trying to soothe him. Sirius did not say a word, just holding her. For a long time, they stayed like that, and it was strange indeed how you could be held by someone you cared about deeply, yet feel so bereft and alone. Finally, Sirius broke the silence.

"It was never just sex, you know," he said softly. "Never. And... and I never thought you were just some schoolgirl with a crush either. You were always more than that to me and you know what, kitten?"

"What?" Marlie had gone very still as he'd spoken. She did not want to know where this was going. But she couldn't stop herself from asking.

"You still are," Sirius breathed. "Kitten, I-"

"Don't," Marlie whispered, her mind leaping to its own conclusions and her heart definitely not wanting to hear this. "Don't say it."

Too late. Sirius ignored her and said it anyway.

"I love you, little kitten," Sirius said softly. "And I know you don't feel the same way, and I don't deserve you anyway, certainly not now, but I want you to know that I do care, and I didn't just want to use you."

Marlie closed her eyes, wishing her ears could do likewise. It was the last thing she wanted to hear from him. *Now he tells me. Damn you, Sirius!* If only the stubborn bastard had told her earlier. Once, she might have squealed and fallen into his arms. Now? Now she just felt tired and empty - all cried out, and tired, so very tired, of having her feelings screwed around with, of Sirius Black being around her when he felt like it, and disappearing when he didn't. *I'm sorry, Sirius. I'm too worn out to keep doing this. I'm sorry, but I just can't do this any more.*

"Marlie?" she heard him whisper. "Are you OK?" She nodded.

"Yeah, I just... I'm just a bit shocked, that's all." *I'm not shocked, you moron. I'm just amazed at how spectacularly badly you've gone about dealing with it. Idiot.*

"Understandable. Not every day a thirty something lunatic declares undying love for you, is it?" Which was true on all counts, Marlie thought.

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?" Marlie sighed. "It would have saved a lot of hassle if you'd just admitted it at Christmas, you know."

"Didn't want you to run screaming. Or laugh."

Marlie did just that. "You idiot," she said fondly. "I wouldn't have laughed at you."

"Oh, but you would have run screaming?" Sirius raised an eyebrow.

"No!" Marlie protested. "Well, alright, I'd have been a bit, well, OK, a lot, shocked, and it might have taken a while to get used to the idea..."

"You'd have run screaming in horror and revulsion," Sirius finished with a grin. "It's OK. You don't need to say anything. It's just we were getting

on really well, and I didn't want to ruin it by saying anything stupid. Ironical, really, eh?" He loosened his grip on her, tilting her head backwards so he could look properly at her. "I'm really sorry, kitten," he said softly, running his thumb over her cheek. "I'll understand if you never want to see me again, but... I'd really like it if we could... that is, if you want to, of course... keep on seeing each other. I mean, if you could keep visiting me, that is. It's just that I've really missed you..."

Despite everything, Marlie couldn't help but smile. Wary as she was, Sirius had a way of winning her over.

"Of course I'll come and see you again," she said, hugging him. "I'm not leaving you on your own. You do stupid things when you're left to your own devices, like freak out Gryffindor third years and throw the entire school into chaos."

"Don't remind me," Sirius groaned. Marlie giggled.

"One day, Sirius, we'll look back on this and laugh about it."

"Yeah, if neither of us get killed first." Sirius began stroking her hair. "Do you mean it, then? You'll still come and see me?"

"Suppose," Marlie sighed. "Someone's got to keep you out of trouble, after all."

Sirius grinned, pulling her in for a cuddle and planting a kiss on her forehead. "Cool. And, er, if I ever look like I'm going to do something stupid, will you promise me something?"

"What?"

"Slap some sense into me? A good kick in the nads ought to do it."

Marlie burst out laughing. "OK," she giggled. Sirius grinned back at her, before leaning back and gathering her next to him, wrapping arms and legs around her and letting her snuggle up against him.

"So what did bring you here then? Aside from my monumental fuck-up last night, of course, but I find it hard to believe that alone would have you running after me and flinging yourself at me in tears."

Marlie went very still as she remembered what had sent her running over here to make sure Sirius was OK. Trying to stop her hand shaking, she reached inside her pocket, restored the newspaper to its proper size and passed it over to him. Sirius took it and read it without a word. Marlie stared at him, amazed at how calmly he seemed to be taking it. He noticed the look on her face.

"It was always a possibility, kitten," he said, stroking her chin. Marlie shook her head, disbelieving.

"How can you be so calm about this?" Marlie whispered. "They're going to *destroy* you if they find you, and you're just sitting there like they're announcing the football results!"

"Marls, please. I'm a lot less calm about the football results." He dropped the newspaper carelessly on the floor before turning back to her. "I never really thought they'd be interested in actually sitting me down and talking to me when they found me. To be honest, I'm surprised it's taken this long."

"Surprised... Sirius! They're talking about *destroying your soul!*" Marlie cried. "Killing you! No, more than killing you! *Wiping you out!* No afterlife, no reincarnation, nothing! You'd be gone, forever!"

"I'm not afraid of dying," said Sirius quietly.

"*I'm* afraid of you dying!" Marlie shouted at him. "*I* don't want you to die. I don't want... I don't want to lose you." Her voice trailed off as she realised how much she was giving away. Sirius, damn him, appeared to have noticed it too, because the familiar irritating smirk was back. Grinning, he ran his thumb down her cheek, tracing the outline of her face in a gesture that annoyed her precisely because the intimacy did not feel overly familiar.

"Why, would you miss me then?" For a brief second, his eyes softened, and had Marlie seen it, she would have been back in his arms in a moment... but she was too busy sulking to notice.

"Shut up." Marlie glared at him, but unfortunately, Marlie was not blessed with the physique to deliver truly intimidating glares of death. Sirius just chuckled, affectionately tickling under her chin.

"You're so sweet when you're worried about me. Especially when you're trying to hide it."

"I'm not worried! I just don't want to see you get Kissed."

"You're worried," Sirius laughed. "It's alright, Marls, I know you have a heart really."

Marlie folded her arms and went into fullscale sulking.

"You're an insufferable, arrogant prick. And I hate you. You bastard." Sirius's grin became even wider as he leaned forward and kissed the end of her nose. Marlie promptly let out an outraged squeal and scooted away, hissing furiously at him.

"You're adorable," he proclaimed, besotted smile firmly in place. "Marry me?" Marlie responded with a strangled cry and a well-aimed cushion to the head.

"Take it that's a no, then," Sirius gasped, after lowering his arms and brushing his hair out of his eyes.

"Arsehole." Marlie got to her feet. "Well, seeing as you're apparently better, I'm going back. Hogsmeade weekend today, and I promised I'd go. Lu wants a girlie outing - apparently she's tired of being the third wheel while Rianne and Lucas are all over each other. But I might be able to come back later on. Will you still be around?"

"Probably. I told Bucky to hide in the Forest last night and wait until I called him. He'll be quite safe there - the only people likely to find him are the centaurs and Hagrid, and I doubt any of those will be talking."

"Oh, so it was you who pinched that Hippogriff then," said Marlie, hoping her disapproval would shame him at least a little bit. No such luck.

"I didn't pinch him," said Sirius indignantly. "I helped him escape. We're friends. Buddies. Companions. Fellow outlaws on the run from authority. I look out for him, he looks out for me."

Marlie rolled her eyes. "Bloody hell, Sirius." She could only sigh in exasperation. Not for the first time, she asked herself quite why she kept coming back to him, kept wanting to protect him. Truth be told, she wasn't sure. But there was something about him that kept her from just washing her hands of him and walking away.

"So, tonight then," she said.

"Tonight," Sirius grinned, lazing back on the sofa, looking decidedly cheerful for a condemned man. But what neither of them knew was that they'd be face to face again a lot sooner than that.

Surprisingly, despite the high security alert, the Hogsmeade weekend went ahead as usual. After all, the reasoning went, seeing as Harry seemed to be Sirius Black's target, and seeing as Harry wasn't allowed off campus, there was no reason to spoil everyone else's fun.

And so the school emptied, well, partly. In Slytherin at least, quite a few of the older students stayed behind, the novelty having worn off some time ago. Which meant Deanna, much relieved, was not stuck with minding the first and second years again.

"You sound most pleased," Professor Severus Snape remarked, as he moved one of his bishops. "Anyone would think you didn't like the new first years."

"They're little bastards," Deanna said vehemently, moving a pawn forward to protect her queen. "Even when they're behaving, which isn't often, I can tell you, they're so bloody noisy! Constantly shouting at each other, even though they're all of three feet away. I don't think I've ever spent so much time in the library. Did you know, I actually ran out of homework last week?"

"Did you really?" Snape arched an eyebrow. "I'm clearly not giving you enough."

"Oh, don't worry, two days later and McGonagall and Binns had more than made up for it." Deanna shook her head. "Dear god, what is this place coming to when the bloody first years are causing more stress and worry than my OWLs?"

"Have you considered hexing them?" Snape asked. "Silencing Charms are generally quite effective, I find."

"Every day it gets more and more tempting," Deanna sighed. She looked hopefully at him. "Does this mean you'll turn the Blind Eye if anyone finally does snap and hex them?"

"Now, now, Deanna. You know I generally prefer to avoid intervening in Slytherin internal politics." There was a twinkle in his eye as he said this, a knowing look that Deanna swiftly picked up on.

"Thanks, sir," she said, grinning. "I appreciate it."

They continued to play for some time, and after a few hours, the score was Snape two, Deanna one, and they were in the middle of a toughly fought game that could go either way. Deanna was just pondering her next move when the door burst open and Draco, Crabbe and Goyle burst in, covered in mud.

"What happened to you?" Deanna asked, not even bothering to conceal a grin.

Draco stopped short to see her there, going rather pale, well, paler anyway. Deanna couldn't help but notice that he looked almost embarrassed.

"Ah. Er, hello. I, er, didn't see you there," he said, beginning to blush beneath the dirt.

"Draco." Snape's voice cut smoothly through the boy's discomfiture. "If you and your friends have a reason for invading my office without so much as a knock or a 'Good afternoon, Professor', treading mud all over the place, I might add, then I would dearly love to hear it. Otherwise I am afraid I am going to have to ask you to leave." The expression on his face was one Marlie would have killed to be able to use on Sirius effectively. Draco gulped as all the blood drained out of his face.

"No, there's a reason, Professor!" he managed to say.

"And?" Snape folded his arms, very much looking forward to hearing this one.

"Potter!" said Draco desperately. "Potter was in Hogsmeade!"

That got both Snape and Deanna's attention.

"Potter?" said Snape, sitting up, all ears now. "In Hogsmeade?" He looked the three boys up and down. "Does this have something to do with your current dishevelled state?"

All three of them nodded eagerly.

"That's right," said Draco, relieved.

"I see," said Snape, stroking his chin as he began to contemplate the possible uses of this information. "You had better tell me everything."

"Well, we were heading for the Shrieking Shack, as we didn't get to see it last time," Draco began, "and who should we see there but Ron Weasley?"

"And you were civility itself, weren't you?" Deanna said, hoping her own anxieties for Harry weren't showing.

"We talked," said Draco stiffly.

"And?" said Snape.

"And it was the strangest thing, sir, but as we were talking with Weasley, a lump of mud flew through the air all by itself and hit me in the head," said Draco, trying to look wide-eyed and innocent.

Deanna stifled a giggle, but only after a sharp look from Snape. Draco did his best to look unruffled, not exactly an easy task when his hair was still dripping with mud.

"Did it?" said Snape, his patience starting wear within.

"Yes sir. Then there was another one. And another one."

"I see. And did anything else happen, or did the mysterious mud shower drive you straight back here?"

"Well, sir, that's when it got really interesting. Goyle here tripped on something, and all of a sudden, Potter's head appeared in midair! What do you say to that, sir?"

Snape did raise an eyebrow at that. Deanna, who knew Harry owned an Invisibility Cloak, could only feel her heart sink. *Harry bloody Potter... Black tried to kill you only last night, and only failed because of sheer*

luck on your part, and you're sneaking out to Hogsmeade?? Mum is going to have a fit if she ever hears about this!

"Interesting," Snape murmured. "Very interesting indeed."

Draco nodded breathlessly, exchanging glances with his friends. "Yes sir, that's what we thought. Which is why we came to tell you. We thought you might want to know." Draco's eyes gleamed at this, betraying the hope that Snape would come down hard on Harry.

"Indeed," Snape nodded, clearly pondering this. "You did the right thing in telling me, Draco. Five points to Slytherin." His face twisted as he nodded at the mud still dripping on to the floor. "It would have been more had you not been ruining my floor. Go and clean up at once, before Mr. Filch catches you."

Draco's face coloured at the dismissal. "Oh. Right. Yes, sir. Of course." He lingered by the door, wondering if there was anything more. "Are you going to discipline him then, sir?"

Snape shot him a cold glare, paying particular attention to the mud all over Draco's robes. "Draco. Go."

Draco's eyes flicked to Deanna, who was by now openly smirking at him. His face coloured again as he glanced down at himself, before indicating to Crabbe and Goyle to follow him, and disappearing, presumably to abuse the shower facilities.

"So," said Deanna softly. "What are you going to do?"

"Talk to Potter, of course."

"And then what? Is he going to be in trouble?" Deanna tried to make her anxiety sound as much as ghoulish pleasure as possible.

"That, Deanna, will depend on whether he can provide a convincing account of his whereabouts this afternoon." Snape's lips curved into a thin smile that sent chills down Deanna's spine. Deanna laughed, but inside she could only groan. Harry was in trouble, and if Snape got hold of him, it was only a matter of time before her mum found out, and then Harry would really be in for it. Somehow, she couldn't quite bring herself to abandon him to his fate. And so, losing to Snape in about four moves, she bade him goodbye and headed out, hoping she could find and intercept her young foster-brother before anyone else did.

Fortunately, Deanna had something that Snape didn't have - intuition based on a memory of before Christmas. A memory of Harry emerging as if from nowhere, near a statue of a one-eyed witch, clutching a mysterious parchment in his hand, and bearing news that could only have come from overhearing a conversation he wasn't meant to hear. A conversation that took place where he wasn't meant to be, perhaps. That had taken place in Hogsmeade, maybe?

It was a long shot, but it was all she had to go on. After all, Harry was hardly likely to be strolling up the driveway, was he?

So Deanna raced to the one-eyed witch, positioned herself opposite, and waited. Sure enough, she hadn't been there for more than ten minutes before the statue moved to one side, and Harry Potter stumbled out, looking rather panicked, although not surprised to see her, Deanna noted.

"Deanna!" Harry gasped. "Thank god! I need your help!"

"Yeah, I'd say you do," Deanna glared at him. "Bloody hell, Harry, *what* were you thinking of, sneaking out to bloody Hogsmeade, the very day after Black tries to kill you! Are you completely insane?"

Harry didn't answer. He mumbled something incoherent and stared sheepishly at his feet.

"And then," Deanna continued, not bothering to reign in her annoyance, "not content with risking your life like that, you go and top it all off by throwing mud at Malfoy, and not only that, go and get your cloak pulled off so that everyone can see your head!" She sharpened her glare at him. "You, Harry, are an idiot."

"I know," said Harry, desperate enough to not bother with his usual pride. "I know, I'm an idiot, and a moron, and a muppet, and a prat and

anything else you want to call me. It was a stupid, stupid thing to do, and I'm really, really sorry." He looked hopefully at her. "Help?"

Deanna threw her hands up in the air. "Bloody hell, Harry. Alright, alright. What do you need me to do?"

"Give me an alibi?"

"Sorry, Harry," Deanna sighed. "No can do. Because you know where I've spent the afternoon? Playing chess with Snape. I somehow don't think he's going to believe I've mastered bilocation and spent the afternoon both playing chess with him, and studying with you at the same time."

Harry cursed his luck. "Damn. Suppose it's too much to hope Snape doesn't know yet, isn't it?"

"Far too much. How do you think I found out? I was there when Malfoy turned up going on about how he'd seen your head in Hogsmeade."

Harry closed his eyes. "Bugger."

"That about sums it up, yes."

"So what do I do now?" said Harry, looking forlornly at his cloak and the parchment, which Deanna noticed, looked rather like a map.

"Go back to Gryffindor," Deanna advised. "Go straight back to Gryffindor. Use the cloak. When you get there, stay there. Get Ron to sneak food to you. Don't come out until lessons start on Monday. It is just possible Snape may have forgotten by then, or have found something else to occupy him. It's not very likely, but it's possible. When he finally does corner you, deny everything. With no evidence except Malfoy's word to go on, there's not a lot he can do, is there?"

"No, suppose not," Harry sighed. He didn't look happy, but then again, with a certain confrontation with Snape looming, who would? He glanced down at the parchment, and as his eyes widened in horror. "Fuck!" he breathed. "Snape!"

Deanna looked up, eyes scanning in both directions, but there was no one in sight... until she heard footsteps in the distance. She turned back to Harry, who had been looking in the same direction. Their eyes met, and then, without a word, Harry had tapped the statue with his wand and hissed "Dissedium!" The statue moved aside again, revealing the passageway that Harry had emerged from, that presumably led to Hogsmeade. Harry darted back down it, before turning to Deanna.

"Coming?" he whispered.

Deanna hesitated. On the one hand, joining him would mean she was condoning his actions earlier, and would get her in trouble if Snape

caught them. But on the other, she didn't really feel like explaining to Snape why she was here either.

In the end, her sense of adventure won out, and a path was chosen. Biting the bullet and acting on impulse, Deanna dived in after Harry, and as Snape rounded the corner, closed the passageway entrance behind her.

Crouching in the darkness, they listened, barely able to breathe as Snape's footsteps drew nearer and nearer... and then stopped, seemingly right outside their hiding place. Deanna felt her blood run cold. What if Snape knew about this passageway? What if he too knew how to open it? What if he'd seen the door close and knew they were there? What if the door was going to open any minute and reveal their hiding place? Deanna began to wonder why on earth she'd done this. If she was found hiding here with a very guilty Harry, and by Snape, of all people... The consequences didn't bear thinking about.

But she was in luck. After a few nailbiting moments, Snape seemed to tire of waiting, and began to walk away again. Neither Harry nor Deanna moved until the footsteps were barely audible, and then Harry lifted his wand and whispered "*Lumos*."

Deanna shut her eyes, near-blinded by the sudden light. Blinking, she squinted as Harry peered at the map. When her sight finally cleared, she peered over his shoulder, curious as to what it actually was... and how Harry had known Snape was on the way.

"What is that?" she whispered, examining it carefully. To her astonishment, she realised she was looking at a map of Hogwarts.

"It's the Marauders' Map," Harry whispered back. He passed it over to her, grinning. "Fred and George gave it to me after they nicked it from Filch's office. Isn't it the coolest thing ever?"

"Nifty," Deanna murmured. "Where are we, I wonder? Well, the stairs are here, here's our floor, there's the one-eyed witch," her eyes widened as she saw the passage marked... with two dots hiding in it labelled Harry Potter and Deanna Tyler.

"Wicked," Deanna breathed.

"Isn't it?" Harry grinned. "It's got everyone in the castle on it - don't ask me how it does it. That's how I knew Snape was coming, I looked round the corner and saw him coming up the stairs."

"This is genius," Deanna whispered, still not over the shock. "Harry, this is the coolest thing I've ever seen! Who made it?"

"Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs," Harry announced proudly. "Pranksters extraordinaire."

"Hmm. I don't recognise the families," said Deanna with a frown, although at the back of her mind, a little voice was nagging at her brain, reminding her that the names sounded vaguely familiar. Had she run into one of them before or something? "Must be aliases. Well, whoever they were, they were talented, I'll give them that. Honestly, Harry, if I'd found this on anyone else, I'd have confiscated it." She noticed Harry suddenly looking worried, and winked at him. "It's alright, little brother. You can keep it. I don't really need it, after all." Harry smiled, and Deanna gave him a hug before returning her attention to the map, still fascinated. She always had had a bit of a thing for maps. "Does it show the grounds as well, or is it just the school?"

Harry nodded, leaning over to show her how to work it. "Oh yeah, it's all on here. Look, you tap here," he pressed his wand tip to just outside the castle wall, "and the grounds show up too. Look, there's the lake, and there's the edge of the Forbidden Forest - you can see Hagrid in his hut there, look - oh, and there's the Whomping Willow, and someone heading towards it..." He adjusted his wand so that they could both read the name of the dot heading for the Willow... and froze, staring at the map wide-eyed. Deanna followed his gaze and felt the hairs on her own neck start to rise.

"Can't be," Harry whispered. "He can't just be walking across the grounds in broad daylight like that, can he?"

"Could be," Deanna breathed. "See for yourself, there's no one else about. And if he's brave enough, or desperate enough, to break into Gryffindor..."

She traced the name with her fingernail. There was no doubt about it. Sirius Black was strutting across the grounds, in the open, headed for the Whomping Willow... which, Deanna realised, was sitting right on top of another passageway.

"Harry," she said softly, "where does that passageway go?"

"I don't know," said Harry. "But I think it leads towards Hogsmeade."

"And where does this passageway go?"

"Comes out in Honeydukes cellar."

"And do you think Sirius Black knows about the passageway under the Willow?"

"I don't know," said Harry, worried. "But I can't think of any other reason to be heading that way."

Deanna bit her lip, frowning. Harry had a very good point - the only reason to go anywhere near the Whomping Willow was if you wanted access to the passage beneath. It wasn't likely Sirius Black knew it was there, but it wasn't impossible either. And it led to Hogsmeade, but they didn't know where. But why would Sirius Black be going to Hogsmeade? Unless... Deanna glanced up at Harry, a horrible thought

occurring to her. Everyone knew it was a Hogsmeade weekend this weekend. The dates were in the Prophet, for goodness' sake. But not everyone knew Harry couldn't go - her mum hadn't made that information generally known, and Harry wasn't keen on broadcasting the fact either. Was Black hoping to ambush Harry in Hogsmeade?

"We have to do something, Harry," Deanna whispered. "We can't just let him get away."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, you're right." His eyes narrowed. "We might not get another chance as good as this one." He lifted his Invisibility Cloak up. "Coming with me?" he asked, looking for all the world as if he was inviting her on a day out.

"You're going after him," said Deanna softly. She'd not really expected that. She'd been thinking more along the lines of borrowing the map, packing Harry off under his cloak, finding Snape and alerting him. But the more she thought about it, the more the idea started to appeal. There was a part of her that wanted to reel Black in personally, wanted to make him pay... wanted to know why he'd turned.

"Yeah," Harry nodded. He noticed the doubt in her eyes. "Don't try and stop me, Deanna! If we leave it, he'll disappear, and we'll have lost him!" He changed his tone from angry to wheedling. "Come on, Deanna," he coaxed. "You want him caught as much as I do, I know you do. You want revenge too. You must want it even more, what with remembering and everything."

"I promised Mum I wouldn't go looking for him," said Deanna, still watching the map. By the Willow, the dot labelled 'Sirius Black' had acquired a stick and was poking a lump on one of the roots, causing the tree to open up for him. "But its not exactly looking if we know where he is, is it?" A malicious smile began to creep across her face, a smile which found itself reflected on Harry's face as he realised he'd won her over.

"Get the Cloak, Harry," said Deanna, getting to her feet. "We're going in."

Chapter Twenty Nine

Justice Served Unjustly

Sirius Black, for his part, had been having a fairly leisurely day so far. After Marlie had gone, he'd changed into Padfoot and curled up on the sofa, feeling much better than he'd done earlier. Admittedly, things were outwardly no better on the Wormtail front... but Marlie was speaking to him again, and that somehow made everything else seem bearable. *Ah, Marlie, I love you, I've missed you, I want you to come back from Hogsmeade early and tell me you couldn't wait until tonight to see me again.* Not that this was likely to happen, but a man could hope, couldn't he?

After a few hours sleep, he'd headed out, still disguised as Padfoot, and slipped off to the Forbidden Forest to check on Buckbeak, stopping by Hagrid's hut on the way back to get fed and fussed over. And now he was back in the Shack, spread out on the sofa and attempting to do the Daily Prophet's crossword while entertaining fantasies of Marlie bursting back in, throwing the paper away and demanding sex right there, right then. Never let it be said that Sirius was not capable of multi-tasking.

Unfortunately, too many thoughts of Marlie had lowered his guard. Which is why instead of going for his wand when the trapdoor opened, he glanced up and said, "Hey, kitten, you're ear-"

The spell hit him before he even registered that the witch climbing into the Shack was not blonde.

"*Stupefy*." Sirius's arms fell to his side as he crumpled to the floor. Emerging fully into the Shack, Deanna Tyler stalked over to his side and nudged him with her toe, smirking at having got one over the all-powerful Sirius Black so easily.

"It's alright, Harry," she called over her shoulder. "You can come up now. I've Stunned him." Kneeling down to observe her prey, she noticed the wand tucked in the belt of his jeans and removed it, raising an eyebrow at that. She hadn't known that he'd acquired a wand again.

Harry had by this time climbed into the Shack and joined her. He looked down at Sirius, fascinated. So this was the dangerous Dark wizard who'd effectively murdered his parents. He stared at Sirius's face, wondering how he could look so normal. It seemed obscene, somehow, that one so evil could look like an ordinary man. Not even ordinary, in fact. This man, although with his hair starting to go grey around the edges, and careworn lines around the eyes and more than a few days' worth of black stubble adorning his chin, was revoltingly handsome, when everything about him had led Harry to expect a raving madman.

"He looks nothing like his Wanted picture," said Harry, brushing Sirius's hair out of his face. It felt soft to the touch.

"No," said Deanna, frowning. "He's cleaned himself up, for a start. And these aren't Azkaban robes, either." She fingered the woollen sweater

Sirius was wearing. It was Muggle-wear, but all natural fabrics from the feel of it. Not cheap. And the jeans were proper Levi's too, with Doc Marten boots on his feet. While the long coat he was wearing was real leather.

"Where do you think he got Muggle clothes from?" said Harry.

"I don't know," said Deanna. "It's possible he stole them, but there's been no reports of anyone of Black's description mugging anyone for their clothes. Or holding up the Doc Marten's store for that matter." She fingered his coat, wondering if the Aurors would need to take it as evidence. She'd always wanted a coat like this.

"He does look very clean, doesn't he?" said Harry thoughtfully. "He looked filthy in that Wanted poster, really thin and pale too. Now he looks healthier than Snape does."

"Yeah," Deanna murmured. He even looked a bit similar to Snape - something in the cheekbones. But Sirius, although he needed a shave, had far better hair. You wouldn't have thought he'd been living rough for the last eight months. Deanna looked at the wand she'd taken from him, the incongruous leather sofa, and the newish looking rucksack in the corner, lying next to a Self-Filling Wash Basin and a suspiciously clean white towel.

"Someone's been helping him," she said softly. "Someone's bought him clothes and a wand, and probably food as well. And this," she patted the sofa.

Harry shook his head. "But who would do that?" he asked, bewildered. His eyes hardened as he contemplated the thought of Black having allies.

"I don't know," said Deanna, her thoughts echoing Harry's. "But I want to find out. Whoever it is, they have contact with the Muggle world as well as ours. If Voldemort's followers have learnt how to operate as Muggles, things could get very bad." Rolling Sirius on to his back, she secured him to the floor, magically binding him at the ankles, wrists and neck, with his hands pinned above his head and his legs apart.

"Enervate."

Sirius woke up, eyes flicking in all directions as he realised he was tied and vulnerable. After a quick struggle revealed that he was going nowhere any time soon, he looked up and saw Deanna and Harry watching him. The fight seemed to die out of him as he saw them, although if anything, he looked more fearful than before.

"What's the matter, Black?" said Deanna, softly. "Cat got your tongue?"

A brief flicker of a smile flitted across Sirius's face, before he turned to look at Harry, a very strange look appearing on his face. If Harry hadn't known better, he'd almost have thought Black looked pleased to see him.

"Harry," Sirius whispered, amazed. Deanna promptly aimed a hex at him, striking him on the cheek and causing him to yelp in pain.

"Don't talk to him," she snapped. "After what you've done, you're lucky I haven't killed you outright."

Sirius blinked, still addled by the pain that the nasty looking slash on his face must be causing him. Slowly, he lifted his head, brilliant blue eyes trying to focus. Deanna forced back a brief pang of emotion. There was so much in those eyes...

"Deanna," Sirius finally said, sadness and more than a hint of panic colouring his words. "My, haven't you grown?"

This was met by another stinging hex that slashed through his sweater and the white vest he was wearing underneath. Sirius jerked in pain, but did not scream.

"Shut up," Deanna hissed. "You are no kin of mine!"

"That's not your decision to make, kiddo," Sirius gasped. Deanna kicked him on the knee, the heel of her own Doc Martens connecting with his kneecap. Sirius bit his lip, wincing.

"Trust me, Black," said Deanna coldly, "my mother will not be welcoming you back into the family any time soon. Of that you can be certain."

Sirius did not reply, struggling against his bonds before looking Deanna in the eye.

"Let me go," he said, sounding surprisingly gentle. "Come on, Deanna, this isn't for you. Leave me for the Aurors if you want, but you shouldn't be doing this. Either of you." He gave a particularly firm look at Harry, who flinched away. There was something in that gaze that went straight to his stomach, making him feel guiltily queasy.

"Deanna, maybe this isn't such a good idea," Harry began. "Maybe we should just stun him again and owl your mum."

"No," said Deanna. "I want to know who's helping him." Dropping to her knees beside him, she ran the tip of her wand along his chest, lifting the torn edges of his sweater up. "I want to know who bought him these. I want to know where his wand came from. Who smuggled that sofa in here. Whose rucksack that is." She lifted her eyes to meet Sirius's. "I want to know who Kitten is."

Sirius went very still, horror creeping into his eyes. "You leave her out of this," he snapped, before realising what he'd given away, and going quiet.

"So. You do have an ally and it's a girl," Deanna gloated. "Care to tell me who she is?"

Sirius closed his eyes, turning away, jaw set at a very defiant angle, refusing to say a word. Deanna folded her arms.

"Well? I'm waiting."

"I'm not talking," said Sirius, stubborn to the last. Deanna raised her wand, placing the tip to his cheek.

"You had better start talking, Black," said Deanna softly. "Because if you don't talk, I have no scruples about hurting you until you do."

That got his attention. Blue eyes flickered open as he twisted round to face her.

"You wouldn't."

Deanna merely smiled. Across from her, Harry watched, dubious about whether they were doing the right thing. In Hogwarts, this had seemed like a good idea... but now he was looking at not a name on a map, or a photo in the paper, but a real flesh and blood man, he wasn't so sure. Taking revenge and either killing Black outright or capturing him for the Aurors was one thing... but seeing Deanna torture him was something

else. Harry noticed Sirius Black looking at him, those obscenely striking blue eyes actually appearing concerned. Not afraid... but seemingly anxious. About him? Not possible, surely. Harry tried very hard to remember that this was the man who'd got his parents killed, but there was something about him that Harry felt oddly drawn to. There was something very wrong here, but Harry couldn't think what.

"Deanna, are you sure about this?" said Harry. "The Aurors'll get him to talk, surely."

Deanna responded by punching Sirius hard in the stomach. As Sirius gritted his teeth, face screwed up, Deanna watched him, eyes glinting dangerously as she got to her feet and began prowling around him.

"I want him to talk to me."

"Couldn't you have just sat next to me on the sofa and chatted like a normal person?" Sirius managed to get out.

"Tell me who Kitten is," Deanna returned.

"No."

Deanna flicked her wand again, causing another laceration on his chest. Sirius writhed in his bonds, but succeeded in not screaming.

"Deanna," he finally panted, turning beseeching eyes to face hers.
"Deanna, *'m ferch, gwna mo gwna hon. Gwna mo ca at bod hon ffordd.*"

Deanna let out a little gasp of shock, before her face twisted in fury. Harry, who had no idea what was going on, could only watch, stunned, as Deanna abandoned her wand and began kicking Sirius, raining blows on him wherever she could reach.

"Shut up, shut the hell up, how dare you speak Cymraeg to me, thanks to you my fucking mother tongue is fucking *English!* And don't you ever, ever, dare call me *daughter!*" She finished by delivering a brutal kick to the side of his head. Sirius fell back, grimacing, one eye already starting to swell shut as a rivulet of blood starting to run down his cheek. Breathing heavily, Deanna turned to look at Harry, who was looking very wary. Almost... scared of her. The sight of him seemed to bring her back to herself, as she realised how this must look. Sirius did have one point - maybe this was too much for Harry at least.

"Harry," she said, sounding gentler than she had done. "Go back to school. Get a teacher - first one you find. If you run into Snape, tell him I have Black captured in the Shack - it'll distract him like nothing else." She took one of the rings off her fingers, a gold one with a blue stone, resembling a falcon's head, and gave it to him. "Show him this - it'll prove you're not lying."

Harry took the ring, fingering it pensively. "Are you sure you'll be alright on your own with him?"

"I'll be fine," said Deanna, although in truth, she was anything but certain of that. Still, what choice did she have? She certainly wasn't going to leave him unsupervised. And so, as Harry disappeared down the trap door, she prepared to wait.

Meanwhile in Hogsmeade, Marlie was happily unaware that anything was wrong. In fact, she was just returning from shopping with Luella, ready to meet up with Rianne at the Three Broomsticks.

"Now that was fun," Marlie noted, shrinking down all the bags and dropping them in her schoolbag.

"Wasn't it just?" agreed Luella, doing the same. "We must do this more often." She looked carefully at Marlie, realising that the quota of communal girlie things involving Marlie was far, far down on previous years. "We've not seen nearly enough of you this year, you know. You've not been bored on your own, have you?"

"What, me?" Marlie said, trying not to look too startled. "Oh no. No, not at all, I've been keeping busy." Well, busy was certainly one word for it...

"Good. Glad to hear it." Luella's eyes, however, were looking at her just a bit too closely. Marlie began to feel worryingly like she was on a

dissection table or something. Fortunately, Luella did not hold the gaze for long, moving on and entering the pub.

Rianne was sitting in one corner, curled up with Lucas and chatting to a couple of the other boys. She noticed them come in and got up to greet them, smiling broadly.

"Hey girls. Did you get the books and stuff I wanted?"

"Yes, Rianne," Luella sighed. "Your chocolate habit will be satisfied for the next week, at least." Rianne's sweet tooth was one of her better kept secrets.

"Ooh, goody. Show me what you got!" Rianne rubbed her hands, gleefully reaching for Luella's bag, but she never got that far. Stopping midstep, she clutched her head, face twisting in agony.

"Ri?" Luella reached for her friend. "Are you alright?"

"No - argh!" Rianne cried out, sinking to her knees as she flung her head back. "Really... fucking... hurts... ack!" The girl's eyes rolled back in her head as she fell to the ground, body going into spasms.

"Rianne!" Luella shouted, kneeling next to her and reaching for her hand. Rianne didn't respond, but Lucas did, rushing to Rianne's side and angrily shoving Luella aside.

"Leave her alone," Lucas snapped at her, before turning back to Rianne. "Rianne, can you hear me? Are you alright?"

Luella glared at Lucas, concern for Rianne fuelling her anger at the slight. "Excuse me! Just because you two are at it, doesn't mean her friends can't talk to her, you know!"

Lucas ignored her, still trying to reach Rianne, who singularly failed to respond in any way. However, when Marlie, who Lucas didn't seem bothered about keeping away from Rianne, touched her hesitantly on the shoulder, Rianne did react, turning to face her as her eyes snapped back into place. However, they weren't focusing properly, and the voice that Rianne spoke with did not sound like her own.

"Sins of the father coming home to roost, as his children who are not his children come to find him," Rianne hissed, grabbing Marlie's hand in her own.

"Ow! Rianne, you're hurting me!" Marlie cried, trying to get free. Rianne's grip only tightened, nails starting to bite as she continued her prophecy.

"Innocent blood on the hands of the innocent, the sin of Orestes committed anew, justice served unjustly, the innocent will die. Innocent blood on the hands of the innocent... only you can save him now..."

Rianne's nails dug deep into Marlie's hand, beads of blood starting to well up. Marlie sobbed from the pain, too concerned about her damaged hand to think about the words of the prophecy. Then, mercifully, Rianne went rigid, before her eyes closed, all tension went out of her and she fell limply to the floor, unconscious. Marlie clutched her hand to her chest, trying to stem the blood. Lucas was now shaking Rianne by the shoulder, trying to wake her up.

"What was that?" whispered Luella. She was staring not at Rianne now, but at Marlie. "Only you can save who?"

"I - I don't know," Marlie faltered, although inside she knew all too well who it had to be. "I - I think we need to go back to school..."

Luella nodded, frowning, before touching Lucas's shoulder. The boy spun round, furious.

"What??"

"Let's take her back to school," said Luella, keeping commendably calm despite her irritation at him. "Madam Pomfrey should have a look at her."

Not even Lucas at his most possessive could object to that. Conjuring a levitating stretcher and lifting Rianne on to it, he led the way back to Hogwarts, all the other Slytherins in tow. But throughout the journey, Luella's eyes didn't leave Marlie.

If things had been strange before, they were about to take an even more surreal tone. As the small group of Slytherins approached the school, a small dark figure that proved to be none other than Harry Potter staggered up to them.

"Lu!" he gasped. "Thank god! I need your help! Something's happened!"

"I'm rather preoccupied at the moment, Harry," Luella began, shooting anxious glances at the still unconscious form of Rianne.

"Lu, please!" Harry begged. Beside her, Marlie fingered her necklace, tracing the direction he'd come from with her eyes... and feeling everything going very still as she realised that he could only have come from the Whomping Willow. *Children who are not his children...* Harry and Deanna. Not Sirius's children biologically, but emotionally they certainly were.

"Lu, listen to him," Marlie whispered. "I think this is important." *Sirius, Sirius, please be alright, please be safe, please don't have done anything stupid...*

Luella looked at her very strangely, but nodded. Turning to a quizzical Lucas, she called back to him.

"It's alright, I'll deal with this. You take Rianne up to the hospital wing."

Lucas nodded, and the little procession took off, entering the school. Luella turned back to Harry, intrigued.

"Are you alright, Harry? You look worried."

Harry shook his head, eyes blazing. "We've caught him, Lu. Deanna and I, we saw him going into this secret passage, so we followed him and we found him at the end and captured him. Deanna's got him trapped, and sent me to get help." He was fingering a gold ring that both girls recognised instantly as Deanna's prized heirloom ring. "Lu, we've caught Sirius Black!"

Luella stared at him, incredulous, but her own exclamation of "You what?" was drowned out by Marlie's agonised shriek of "NO!"

Marlie looked up and realised both Luella and Harry were looking at her very strangely.

"I mean, no, she can't, she'll be killed, he'll get loose and kill her, he's dangerous!" she babbled in an attempt to cover herself, but Luella's expression had gone very hard all of a sudden, and before Marlie could process what was going on, Luella had grabbed her wand arm and pulled her round to face her.

"I think, Marlie, you had better tell me what exactly is going on, and just what you've been up to all year," said Luella softly, eyes boring into Marlie's. Marlie tried to get free, but Luella's grip was not giving way any time soon, and from the look on her face, there was no escaping this time. With Luella in this sort of mood, and Sirius in imminent peril, there was no help for it. Defeated, Marlie gave in. Her secret was secret no longer.

"He didn't do it, Lu," Marlie gasped, panic making her start to hyperventilate. "He's innocent. He never killed Peter Pettigrew or all those Muggles. Pettigrew's an unregistered Animagus, he faked his own death, blew up the street in the process, transformed and escaped, leaving Sirius to take the blame. And... and he never betrayed your parents either, Harry, Pettigrew was the one working for Voldemort all along, he tricked the way in to Tal-y-Rhys Manor out of Sirius, that's why Sirius went after him, he thought you'd all been killed and wanted revenge. He's not evil, he's good, a good man, he's brave, strong, and he's your godfather, and he adores you, Harry!"

Harry was shaking his head, stunned, and unknown to Marlie, remembering the way Sirius had looked at him earlier. *He's my godfather, my innocent godfather? And... he cares about me?* "No," Harry whispered, sickened at the thought even as something inside him told him it was true. "No, this... this isn't true, it isn't!"

Luella was outwardly far calmer, but even she looked surprised.

"How do you know all this?" she snapped.

"Sirius told me," Marlie replied miserably, unable to meet Luella's eyes.

"And you believed him?" The derision in Luella's voice was there for all to hear.

"Not at first," Marlie whispered, feeling tears of shame running down her cheek. Sniffing them back, she wiped them away with her free hand. "But Animagi, we can recognise each other - it's how Sirius found me - and when I saw Pettigrew for myself, I realised it was true."

She bit back a sob as Luella laughed contemptuously.

"Now I've heard it all. You, an Animagus? When did that happen?"

Something in Marlie flared in that moment, anger that her friends thought so little of her, believed her incapable of mastering something so complex, and irritation that Sirius was out there, held captive and suffering gods only knew what at Deanna's hands, while she was standing here trying to explain herself. Annoyed, she looked up, her own eyes as hard as Luella's.

"Spend a little more time with me, and perhaps you'd know these things," Marlie snapped. "Now let me go. Sirius needs me." Without waiting for a reply, she shifted into her cat form and took off at a run, leaving two shocked teenagers watching her go.

"Lu," said Harry, checking his glasses over, "did I just see Marlie Lovegood turn into a cat?"

"Thank god you saw that too," said Luella, dazed. "Otherwise I would have thought I'd gone mad."

"And... did she say Sirius Black was innocent?" said Harry, trying not to think of the state he'd left Sirius in, and of those blue eyes watching him.

"I think she did, yeah."

"He's alone with Deanna," said Harry slowly. "And... she really wasn't happy with him. She'd already slashed his chest and kicked him in when I left."

What little colour was left drained out of Luella's face as she recalled the words of the prophecy: *Innocent blood on the hands of the innocent, the innocent will die, justice served unjustly.*

"Oh god, Harry," Luella whispered. "We've got to get over there. Before Deanna does something unforgivable."

Wasting no more time, they took off at a run, hoping against hope that they wouldn't be too late.

Back in the Shack, Sirius was still pinned to the floor, watching Deanna carefully, wondering what she was going to do next. After Harry had gone, she'd left off torturing him, and was now sitting on the sofa, examining his wand.

"Gotta hand it to Kitten, she knows her wands," Deanna murmured. "It's good quality, this. Did she steal it, or is she a wandmaker? She surely never got it from Ollivander's for you."

"Curunir's of Knockturn, actually," said Sirius, tugging at the bonds holding his wrists to see if they were going to give any more than they had five minutes ago. The answer was still a resounding no, but it had to be worth a try.

"Figures," Deanna sniffed. "Knows the place well, does she? Old colleague of yours, perhaps?"

Sirius laughed out loud at that. "Hardly." He shifted, trying to get comfortable, or at least as comfortable as he could against a solid wood floor. "Listen, Deanna, it really doesn't have to be like this, you know. I know you want revenge, and it's perfectly understandable, but you're going about it the wrong way. I can tell you things, you know, all sorts of things, agh!" Deanna had sent another hex his way, slashing his jeans and leaving a wound on his thigh.

"All I want to know from you," Deanna snapped, "is who's been helping you. We don't need two Dark wizards on the loose."

"She's not Dark," said Sirius, unable to stop himself defending Marlie.

"Just deluded?" Deanna arched an eyebrow at him. "What lies did you feed her, Black? Did you somehow manage to convince her you weren't bad really, just misunderstood? Don't tell me you seduced her. My god, that is the oldest trick in the book."

Sirius shifted uncomfortably. When Deanna put it like that... Deanna lowered the wand, rolling her eyes at him.

"Oh good god. Black, you are such a walking cliché. Well, the poor girl's going to get her heart broken, that's for sure. Even if you don't tell me who she is, it won't make a difference to you. You're still getting Kissed. Who knows, if we do it publicly enough, we might even catch her when she launches a misguided rescue attempt, and get her Kissed at the same time. Two for one."

"No!" Sirius cried, fighting his bonds. His own death was one thing, but to have Marlie wiped out by Dementors didn't bear thinking about. *Not Marlie. Not little Marlie. Not because of me. Oh god, this was exactly what I was trying to prevent.*

Deanna grinned, amused. "Aw, what's the matter, Black, trying to keep your little tart safe? Too late for that, you know. They've got Veritaserum these days, you know. And highly trained Legilimenses on the payroll. Hope your Occlumency's up to scratch, Black, because if it isn't, and maybe even if it is, they'll have her identity out of you eventually. Save yourself the pain, Black. Confess to me."

Sirius went pale at this. No, his Occlumency wasn't up to scratch - it was pitiful to the point of non-existence. Sirius had never been any good at keeping his thoughts and emotions under control - he was easy prey. When the Aurors came, it wouldn't be long before Marlie's role in proceedings came to light, and while he didn't think she'd get the Dementor's Kiss, she'd be facing certain expulsion and exile, along with the disgrace and public humiliation. Sirius wasn't having his little kitten go through that, not on his account. *I always swore I'd die to protect you, little Marlie. Well, don't say I don't keep my promises.*

"You sure that's all you want to know?" Sirius asked. "Don't you even want to know why?"

Deanna went still. "Why what?" she asked.

"Why I turned," said Sirius softly. "You know there had to be a reason I sold you all out. Don't you wanna know what it is?"

"Not particularly," said Deanna, but she sounded nowhere near as certain as before.

"Shame," Sirius grinned, inwardly praying to the gods to forgive him for the lie. "Seeing as it was your fault and all."

"My fault - how was it my fault??" Deanna demanded. "I wasn't even three!"

"Exactly," Sirius grimaced. "God, you were an irritating child. And you ruined your mother's figure, you know. Ruined her body and trashed her sex drive. She was never exactly easy to live with, but she turned into a right nightmare after having you. And with your gran and Lily there, all fussing around and henpecking me, and James apparently forgetting he'd ever even had balls and a spine... Can you blame a man for wanting out of there? Azkaban was peaceful compared to that. You ever wonder how I survived in there? Because I knew I wasn't living with you lot any more. That's how."

"You utter -" Deanna stared at him, speechless, and far more hurt than she ever thought she'd be. Hadn't she known he was a bastard beforehand? Why was she letting him get to her now? "Shut up, Black. Just shut up."

"Shut up?" Sirius smirked, although inside he was currently hating himself for doing this to her. "Tyler *bach*, I'm just getting started. You want to know who Kitten really is? She's the one I was running to when

your mum wasn't putting out. Right pleased to see me again, she was. You know, I think she was the only one who really missed me when I got sent down. Yeah, when I've done what I escaped to do, Kitten and I are going to be really happy together-" He cried out as Deanna, enraged and hurt beyond all reason, kicked him in the balls.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up, *shut up!*" Deanna screamed, dropping to her knees and punching him repeatedly. "You complete and utter *arse!*" Drawing her wand, she cast another binding charm, going around his neck this time, and drawing it tight.

"I'm going to shut you up, Black," Deanna hissed. "Screw Kitten, we'll find her eventually. I am going to shut your filthy little mouth, and I am going to fucking do it *permanently!*" She moved her wand with a flourish, tightening the neck bond little by little, bit by bit. Sirius had to force himself to stop fighting it, as he felt it tighten around his throat, sparks of light shooting across his eyeballs as the room started to go dark at the edges and his airways started to close.

I'm sorry, Tyler bach. I'm so sorry. I hope you can understand and forgive me. And kitten, oh god, kitten, I love you, I'm sorry, but you can do better than me anyway. Gods forgive me. Dia, Prongsy, here I come... Sirius closed his eyes, feeling himself slowly start to slip away into unconsciousness, slowly sliding into darkness and warmth, but at least he'd be safe now, at least soon he'd be home...

In the distance a door slammed open, a woman screamed "Deanna, no!" and then the pressure was off him as the spell broke. Mainly because its caster had been grabbed from behind and flung across the room, rolling over in a tangled blur of dark hair and blonde, her wand

sent flying by the only one in Hogwarts who'd ever beaten her duelling. Dazed, Sirius blinked, trying to clear his head and focus on his saviour.

Marlie was lying on top of Deanna, pinning her wrists to her chest and using her body weight to hold her down.

"Marls, what the hell are you doing?" Deanna demanded. "I nearly had him!"

"Don't," Marlie choked. "Don't kill him. You don't know what you're doing."

"Marls," Deanna began, but at that moment a still dazed Sirius had recognised Marlie.

"Kitten?" he said, without thinking. Marlie went very still, before slowly turning to look at Deanna. The other girl was staring at her, shocked... but Marlie knew it surely couldn't last.

"You??" Deanna whispered. "You're Kitten?"

"It's not what you think," Marlie said unhappily.

"You've been *helping* him?" Deanna snarled. She made to go for Marlie, but Marlie was quicker. Before Deanna could move, the glinting tips of four pointed talons were a mere hair's breadth from her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Deanna," said Marlie softly. Deanna shook her head, stunned at yet another betrayal, and one that oddly hurt far more than anything Sirius had done.

"How could you?" Deanna whispered. Marlie bit her lip, tears welling up in her eyes.

"I had to," said Marlie, blinking away her tears. But before she could explain, or Deanna ask any more, they were both distracted by Luella climbing into the Shack, wand out. She pointed it at them both.

"Cut it out, the pair of you," Luella snapped. "Marls, move away from Deanna. Deanna, I know you're extremely angry and upset, and probably really confused, and don't think for one minute that I'm not feeling exactly the same, but please, will you stop trying to kill people? It's not going to achieve anything beyond leaving us with a body to dispose of, and trust me, I think we all have quite enough to deal with as it is."

Marlie retracted her claws, and backed away, not daring to look Deanna in the eye. Deanna for her part had clawed her way to sitting upright again, but didn't seem capable of doing more than holding her head in her hands, gazing at Luella in hopeless confusion. Behind Luella, Harry had emerged into the Shack, and gone straight over to her, pulling her into a hug.

"Are you alright?" he whispered. Deanna shook her head.

"What's going on, Lu?" she asked, voice small and lost.

"That's what I'm going to find out," said Luella, turning to face Sirius, who had been staring at her ever since she'd walked in. As she pointed her wand at his head, his eyes left her face, drawn inevitably to a wand he'd seen many, many times before.

"Dia," he breathed. "That's Dia's old wand." Luella did raise an eyebrow at that. "Medea Tyler," Sirius clarified. "Caitlin Tyler's mum."

"I know who Medea Tyler was," said Luella, intrigued despite herself. "Surprised you recognised the wand though."

"Recognise it?" Sirius laughed. "Swore loyalty on it once."

Deanna howled at this, and was only prevented from launching a physical attack on Sirius again by Harry's quick reactions.

"Deanna, leave it," said Harry softly. "Hear him out."

Deanna did not answer, looking to Luella for confirmation. Luella motioned for her to stay back.

"Interesting," said Luella, eyeing her wand anew. "Was this part of your wedding ceremony, or an addition to it?"

"Took place the day I got engaged - Dia wanted me on her side even if things didn't work out between me and Cait." Sirius looked at Luella properly for the first time, taking her in, examining eyes that looked familiar, a face that he was sure he'd seen before, and something in her bearing that reminded him forcibly of Medea. "Luella, isn't it?"

"That's right," Luella nodded, warming to Sirius even though she still didn't trust him yet. There was something about him that drew her to him, something familiar. It was as if she'd known him before. It was very strange, but Luella felt comfortable with him. If things had been different, they would have been good friends, she was sure. But things were as they were, and she could not afford to be soft on him.

"Yeah, Marlie mentioned you. A Muggle-born from Surrey... with a Tal-y-Rhys wand." Sirius looked keenly at her. "How'd you end up with that then?"

"Present from Caitlin after my old wand got broken," said Luella. "And that's all you need to know about it. Tell me more about this vow. What did you swear and what were the penalties for breaking it?"

"I swore loyalty to Medea Tyler and all those who descend from her," Sirius replied. "To protect them, serve them, keep them from harm." He deliberately did not look at Deanna as he said this.

"And the consequences for breaking it?" Luella's voice was soft but her eyes were cold and hard.

"For deliberate and wanton betrayal, the penalty was a slow and lingering death, magically inflicted, to begin as soon as the betrayal took place and to end within nine days," said Sirius.

"But you're still alive thirteen years later."

Sirius nodded. "Yeah."

Luella cocked her head to one side, processing this. Sirius could of course be lying... but Marlie had believed so strongly in his innocence she'd held claws to her best friend's face to save his life. And Marlie usually could tell if someone was lying.

"So were you responsible for the betrayal of the Potters and Tylers then?"

Sirius bowed his head. "It was my fault, yes."

"Sirius!" Marlie screeched from the other side of the room. "It was not your fault! You weren't to know he'd joined Voldemort!"

"I should never have told him," said Sirius softly. "I should have guessed he was up to something - his Animagus form's a rat, for god's sake. Should have known there was no good reason for him to know. He just sounded so convincing, wanted to make sure it was safe there and there weren't any loopholes in the wards or anything..." Sirius turned away, biting his lip. "Prongsy, I'm so sorry, mate," he choked as a tear started to run down his face.

Luella watched, still unsure if perhaps this wasn't another trick... but it did look genuine, and it fitted with Marlie's explanation.

"What house were you in?" she asked softly. "At Hogwarts, I mean."

"Gryffindor," Marlie cut in, getting up and going to Sirius's side, kneeling next to him and stroking his hair unhappily. "It's in the old yearbooks in the library - all the past and present students have their achievements written up in there."

Which meant it was true. All of it. Pettigrew wasn't dead and Sirius... was innocent. He'd turned to face Marlie now, trying to bury his face in her robes. Bending down, Marlie took his head in her hands and rested her face against his, making little soothing noises as she held him. It was now bloody obvious to anyone who cared to look that these two would do anything for each other. Luella recalled Rianne's dream-

vision from the beginning of term, and the loyalty bond she'd described, and Marlie being a cat in the centre of it all, and a man who was also a rat. All true. All so very, very true. She came to kneel on Sirius's other side.

"It was Pettigrew, wasn't it?" Luella said gently. "One of your closest friends tricked the way in to Tal-y-Rhys Manor out of you and went to the Dark Lord with the information. I'm guessing you weren't there when Voldemort came, and got back later to see the place destroyed with the Dark Mark over it." She ran a hand through his hair, feeling her heart go out to him as things began to make sense. "It was never you, was it? You were loyal to the bitter end. Pettigrew wasn't chasing you down, you were after him for revenge. Marlie told me it was him who killed all those Muggles, transformed and escaped, leaving you to take the blame. Is that true, Sirius?"

"Yeah," Sirius whispered. "Yeah, it's all true." He closed his eyes and turned away, limp in Marlie's arms. Luella, breathing heavily, raised her wand and set him free. Marlie gave a little sob and flung her arms around him, clutching him to her. Sirius, flexing his wrists and ankles, sat up, staring around as if he could barely believe that he was free. He was almost on autopilot as he wrapped his arms around Marlie, holding her to him, clinging on to her, the one constant in a world that was changing around him far too rapidly for him to cope with. And he wasn't the only one who wasn't coping well. Deanna was clutching at her hair, pale skin gone almost white as she stared in horror.

"Innocent??" she whispered. "*Innocent?!*" She shook her head, her mind's ability to process anything shot to pieces. "No. No, it can't be, it can't be true, it *can't be true*, it can't, it *can't!!*" She howled the last word before breaking down in tears, sobbing as she repeated the words over and over again, limp in Harry's arms as he stared helplessly at Luella.

Everyone in the room had gone still and was staring at the stricken Deanna... but it was Sirius who came to his senses first, escaping from Marlie's grasp and going to his stepdaughter.

"Tyler *bach*," he whispered, kneeling next to her. "Tyler *bach*, don't. Don't cry, it's not your fault." He pulled her into his arms and held her against his chest. "It isn't your fault!"

Deanna had curled up instinctively, nestling against his chest, sobbing openly into the tattered remains of his sweater. It was some time before she could speak.

"I tried to kill you," she whispered. "I tried to kill you, and you're *innocent*, and not only that, you're my..." She broke off, the words choking her.

Sirius tightened his grip, barely able to speak himself.

"*Cariad bach*, I'm so sorry," he whispered. "It was my fault, I provoked you, I said awful things to you, and they're not true, none of it was true, I just didn't want the Ministry to interrogate me and find out about Marls. Deanna, it's not your fault, it's mine, I am such a fool, can you ever forgive me?"

Deanna howled even louder at this, burrowing into his arms as if trying to hide from the world. Sirius held her, tears in his own eyes. *I tried to*

use her as a suicide weapon to save her friend. She doesn't hate me, I don't think, but will she ever stop hating herself? Come to that, will I?

They stayed like that for some time, united in grief, if nothing else. Luella had taken a seat on the couch, with Marlie and Harry sitting next to her. All three were trying to give Deanna and Sirius a bit of privacy, without much success. Harry in particular kept shooting glances at Sirius. Luella, however, had turned to Marlie.

"How long has this been going on, Marls?" Luella said softly. While reproachful, there was none of the anger of earlier.

"Since about October or so," Marlie admitted. "That was when I finally did my first proper transformation. I went out exploring and ran into Sirius. I didn't know who he was at the time, just that he was an Animagus. He wanted me to help him find a friend of his, a rat Animagus who was pretending to be Ron's pet. So I agreed, and helped him break in to the school at Halloween."

Luella was staring at Marlie. "You what? Without knowing who he was or what he was really after?"

"I know," said Marlie miserably. "But he seemed genuine. He even seemed nice. I mean, I got myself adopted by Hermione and tried to catch Pettigrew myself, but it didn't work. And he didn't get angry or anything, he was OK about it. He didn't seem evil or mad or anything. And then I found out he was Sirius and he was furious at first but then he calmed down," Marlie deliberately decided that the exact circumstances of Sirius's abrupt change of heart were best kept secret,

"and we talked, and he told me everything about what really happened, and I offered to help him. And he was so touched and grateful, Lu, he nearly cried. He reckoned I was the first person to treat him like a human being in twelve years."

"How romantic," Luella murmured, not failing to notice the soppy look that had appeared in Marlie's eyes.

"Shut up," said Marlie, going scarlet. "He's not my boyfriend. We're just mates."

"Of course you are," said Luella, grinning like one who could pick up sexual tension a mile off. She turned back to look at Sirius, blatantly ogling his bum. "Wouldn't blame you if you decided to be more than that though. He's fit."

"Stop staring at him!" Marlie hissed, mortified and more than a little jealous. However, Luella's ogling had turned to concern.

"Marls, he's dripping an awful lot of blood. What did Deanna do to him?"

For the first time, Marlie noticed the pool of blood on the floor, and shrieked. Leaping off the couch, heedless of everyone else's bemused looks, she started digging up part of the floor to reveal a hidden compartment, which proved to contain a few vials of potion. Marlie wasted no time flinging them at Sirius.

"Here," she ordered. "Drink this and drink it now. You're bleeding everywhere."

"Healing potions?" said Luella. "You didn't brew them, did you, Marls? Because if you did, I think he'd be better off taking his chances with the blood loss."

"They're Rianne's," said Marlie tersely. "She told me to keep a supply in case we needed them. Can't take Sirius to the hospital if he gets hurt, can we?"

"Hang on, you mean Rianne's in on this too?" Luella demanded. Marlie lowered her eyes cringing.

"Yeah, she astrally projected after me one time and found out about Sirius," said Marlie guiltily. "I told her not to tell anyone though, and she agreed. Apparently it wasn't time for anyone else to know..." Marlie's voice trailed off under Luella's gaze. Luella stared at her, before launching into a rant about never being told anything around here, and who else was in on this, and when Rianne was well again, Rianne had better watch out, because she was going to find her and give her a piece of her mind.

Sirius emptied one of the vials, watching in amusement, before offering one to Deanna.

"Here, mate. I think you need it." Deanna drank it in silence, barely even grimacing. Sirius watched her swallow the contents down.

"Are you alright?" he asked gently. Deanna shrugged.

"I don't know," she whispered, barely able to look at Sirius. "I nearly... if Marls hadn't come in time..." Sirius winced as she said this.

"I am so sorry, Deanna," he began. Deanna shook her head.

"It's OK," she whispered. "I... I overstepped the line. I hurt you, I tried to kill you. Aurors are not meant to do that, despite what Mum says. Auntie Mel would never have done that."

"Yeah, well, if I hadn't been such a fool, both today *and* twelve years ago, neither you nor your mum would be the way you are now," said Sirius, still stubbornly refusing to let Deanna take any of the blame. "So don't blame yourself, because I don't."

Deanna didn't reply, but she did smile a little. "I am having such a screwed-up day," she laughed.

"You're not the only one," Sirius grinned. His injuries were healing up already, and the curse slashes had already closed. He glanced down at himself. "Just do one thing for me, kid."

"What's that?" Deanna asked.

"Fix me clothes? I don't know how much the kitten spent on these, but when she's finished being worried I'm going to die, she's going to kill me for ruining them."

Deanna laughed and cast the necessary mending charms. Soon Sirius looked as if he'd never been injured. Seeing Deanna looking happier and Sirius looking normal, Harry took advantage and came to sit next to him, wondering what to say to a man that up until this morning, he'd hated. What did you say to a godfather you couldn't even remember?

"Um. Hi?"

Sirius turned to look at Harry properly. Funnily enough, he actually seemed as nervous as Harry did.

"Hello, Harry," he said back. For a few moments, both of them fidgeted nervously, before Harry blurted out the first thing that came into his head.

"Are you really my godfather?"

"Yeah, for what it's worth," Sirius sighed. "Your dad and I were best mates." He looked at Harry, eyes softening. "You do look an awful lot like him, you know."

"Everyone says that," said Harry, feeling somehow disappointed. He'd been hoping for something a little more original from his long-lost godfather.

To his surprise, Sirius actually laughed. "Yeah, suppose they do. Sorry, Harry. I'll try and think of something more original next time. At least I didn't tell you how much you'd grown."

Harry couldn't help but smile. Already he found himself warming to Sirius. It was like having a family in a way, with Sirius as a cool uncle who seemed to take his side against the adults and do things that parents would have a fit about. And in a moment of clarity, Harry realised something else.

"You," he said. "Hermione was right, it was you! You did send me the Firebolt! Except it wasn't a trap, it was a genuine Christmas present because I'd lost my old broom." He noticed Sirius grinning and exchanging looks with Marlie, who was also smiling.

"Guilty as charged," Sirius admitted. "Marls told me about the Nimbus getting trashed, so I got her to use my Gringotts key to order a new broom for you. Did you like it?"

Harry stared at Sirius in awe as the revelation sunk in... before flinging his arms around his godfather and hugging him.

"You're *brilliant!*" he said emphatically. Sirius hesitated, stunned by the fierceness of the response, before hugging Harry back, a silly grin plastered to his face. He glanced up to where Marlie was smiling and giving him a thumbs up. Sirius returned the gesture before letting Harry go.

"Take it that's a yes then," Sirius grinned.

"See, told you he liked it," said Marlie, feeling rather smug at being right. At least she did until she noticed Luella and Deanna looking at her reproachfully.

"Marls, are you trying to sabotage Slytherin's chances?" Deanna asked.

"Because gifting your main rival with that broom is a pretty good way of doing it," said Luella.

"What's it worth not to tell Flinty you were behind it?" Deanna grinned, sensing blackmail in the air.

"Shut up, you two," Marlie glowered. "It wasn't my idea anyway, it was his." She pointed at Sirius. "Blame him!"

"Go Gryffindor," said Sirius, unrepentant grin firmly in place as he ruffled his godson's hair. "We rule."

"Yeah, but at what?" Luella murmured, winking at her friends.

"Ignore them, Sirius," said Harry, still snuggled next to his godfather. "I didn't need a fancy broom to outfly her anyway." He dived behind Sirius as Marlie shrieked in outrage and flung a cushion at him. It missed, hitting Sirius instead; fortunately, he was able to grab it before it struck, limiting the damage.

"I think," said Sirius firmly, placing the cushion back on the sofa, "that perhaps we're all getting just a little overexcited, don't you?"

"Yeah, just because we've caught a wanted criminal and then discovered he was innocent doesn't mean you can all start behaving like children," said Deanna. She looked Sirius up and down, questions still unanswered. "You know, I still don't really get what happened. I get it wasn't you - a mate of yours did it and framed you. But I'm still trying to work out how it all fits together, if you know what I mean." Her eyes narrowed as one question in particular nagged at her. "For example, it doesn't explain why you attacked my mother."

"I didn't attack her!" Sirius protested. "I looked in on her, hoping to tell her what happened and see if she'd help me out, but for some reason, as soon as she laid eyes on me, she started trying to kill me. I ended

up having to fight for my life, before escaping out of the living room window."

"But the living room window doesn't open all the way, you'd never fit..." Deanna recalled the state of it after that night. "Bloody hell, Sirius. You don't do things by halves, do you?"

"Your mum was armed and dangerous and blocking the door," Sirius explained helpfully. "And I was unarmed on account of having just broken your heirloom blade. It was through the window or die horribly, see."

Deanna had folded her arms and was glaring at him. "Yes, I can imagine. Good god, Sirius, can't you be a bit more careful with our stuff?"

"It wasn't my fault!" Sirius protested, turning the puppy-dog eyes on her. "Your mum was the one who sliced it in two. Blame her. Not me. I'm innocent."

"Of course you are," said Deanna. "And you were going to tell us the full story of your innocence, weren't you?"

"I was?"

"That's right," said Harry, disentangling himself from Sirius and sitting next to Deanna. "Marlie really didn't give us a lot of detail, owing to being all hysterical because she thought you were going to die."

Sirius's entire expression softened at this. "Was she? Really?" He gazed at Marlie, smiling almost shyly at her. "Thanks, kitten. You're lovely."

Marlie flushed a deep shade of scarlet, folding her arms and looking away. "Yes, well, you're safe now, can we get on with it please?" Marlie steadfastly ignored Deanna's slightly frosty raised eyebrow, and Luella's knowing look, as she took her place next to Harry. Luella seated herself in between Marlie and Deanna, and motioned for Sirius to begin.

"Come on then, Sirius, tell us what really happened. From the beginning. I suppose you can start by telling us who Peter Pettigrew is."

So Sirius did just that, beginning with his school days and the Marauders, explaining who they were and how they'd become Animagi.

"Hold on," Deanna interrupted. "Remus Lupin? What, like Professor Lupin?"

Sirius confirmed that this was indeed so.

"Professor Lupin's a werewolf?" Harry gasped.

"Yes, he's a werewolf. So?" Sirius looked sternly at them all, as if daring anyone to argue.

"Isn't that... dangerous?" Deanna asked, slightly nervous. She'd heard stories about some of the werewolves. The name of Fenrir Greyback in particular was notorious as a childhood figure of terror among wizarding children.

"He's been here since September, and no one's died or been turned yet," said Luella lightly. "I'd say that's a fairly good sign, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah, but even so," Deanna shivered. "Is it a good idea to have a werewolf so close to kids?"

"Moony," growled Sirius, "is not a threat to kids. Not now. Not ever. He's a good man, and he's my friend. Is this understood?" He shot pointed glares at everyone apart from Marlie. Harry and Deanna both looked away, murmuring "Yes, Sirius" quietly. Luella just nodded.

"He's a very good teacher," she said, meeting Sirius's eyes calmly. "I like him. Doesn't bother me if he's furry and fanged sometimes."

Sirius did smile then, apparently satisfied that if Luella was on side, the others would follow. "I think I like you, Luella. You are clearly a woman of taste and discernment."

Luella laughed. "Thank you. So, Professor Lupin was a teenage werewolf, and you lot decided to become Animagi to keep him company. So then what? Did you manage it?"

Sirius nodded, grinning. "Yeah. By fifth year, Prongsy and I had mastered the art, and trained Wormtail up to do the same."

"Prongsy and Wormtail?" Harry asked, hand going to the Marauder's Map. And hadn't Sirius just referred to Professor Lupin as Moony? "Does that mean you're Padfoot?" It had to be worth a guess. And it appeared he was right too. Both Sirius and Marlie had turned to look at him, Marlie surprised and Sirius astonished.

"Where'd you hear that?" Marlie demanded. Sirius motioned for her to back off.

"Yeah, I'm Padfoot," he said, frowning. "How'd you know that?"

Slowly, Harry unfolded the map and passed it over. "Same way we knew to find you here," he said. "Some friends of mine nicked it out of Filch's cabinet a few years ago. They gave it to me this term. We saw you on it this afternoon and came after you."

Sirius took the map from him and looked it over, a grin spreading out over his face.

"What?" asked Marlie, peering over his shoulder. "What is it, Padfoot?"

"The Marauder's Map," Sirius grinned. "I haven't seen this in years! I thought Filch had chucked it after he couldn't get it to work." He looked up, smiling at Harry. "I can't believe you got hold of it again! This is fantastic!" He reached out and pulled Harry in for a hug, placing a kiss on the top of his godson's head. "Prongsy'd be so proud of you, you know. Er, he was your dad," Sirius clarified at the look of polite confusion on Harry's face.

"Really?" said Harry hopefully.

"Course he would. Sneaking out when you shouldn't be, using his old map to do it, following in his footsteps in a career of rule-breaking and debauchery. He'd be so pleased."

"I've got his old cloak too," said Harry, by now fairly beaming. At this, Sirius howled with delight, giving Harry another bone-crushing hug.

"That does it," Sirius announced, finally releasing Harry. "Soon as my name's cleared, I'm adopting you. You're fantastically, amazingly cool,

and soon as I can get a house sorted out, you're coming to live with me. How does that sound?"

Harry stared at Sirius, mouth falling open. Sirius wanted him to come and stay with him? It was everything Harry had ever wanted. True, Caitlin had taken him in over the summer, and clearly wanted him around... but she'd not been willing to go against the Ministry to do it. Sirius on the other hand clearly had no such reservations, and there was something about Sirius, an unstoppable energy about him that couldn't help but fire you up and make you believe. If Sirius Black had his heart set on something, then that something was going to happen, and woe betide the poor mortal who got in his way. If there had been any doubt in Harry's mind that his godfather was anything other than Coolness Incarnate, those doubts went crashing to the ground. Harry flung his arms around Sirius, burying his head on Sirius's shoulder, eyes closed as he sighed happily.

"Is that a yes?" he heard Sirius ask, the laughter in his voice not quite masking the inner insecurity that Azkaban had left him with. Harry nodded enthusiastically.

"I'd love to live with you," he whispered. Sirius answered by wrapping his arms around Harry, smiling fondly.

"Soon as I'm cleared, mate," Sirius promised. "Soon as I'm cleared."

"Yay," Harry muttered, feeling happy beyond words. It was a feeling that was not to leave him for some time. Not while Sirius continued with his story. Not while Sirius and Marlie both showed off their Animagus

forms, to much oohing and aahing, particularly Deanna over Sirius, and Luella over Marlie. Neither Animagus seemed to mind the attention one bit.

"Oh my god, you are so cute!" Luella squealed, fussing over the fluffy white cat that was purring and stretching in her arms. "And you know what, I have seen you around too! Always wondered whose you were. Now I know. You're Sirius's."

Marlie was back in human form in a second. "I am not anybody's!" she snapped. "And I'm certainly not Sirius's anything!"

"As long as you believe that, dear," said Luella, patting Marlie's arm.

Meanwhile, Sirius had been demonstrating his own form for Deanna and Harry.

"You," said Deanna. "It was you. The dog we played with over the summer. Sirius Black, in our back garden all along." She shook her head. "My god, how thick were we?"

"Let that be a lesson in caution to you," said Sirius. "If I'd wanted to kill either of you, I could have done it like that." He snapped his fingers. "But I don't," he added, rather more gently.

"I'm glad you hung around," said Harry. "You were cool as a dog. I wanted to keep you as a pet, but you kept running off."

"Do you blame me?" Sirius rolled his eyes. "Cait's not stupid, and if she'd sussed me, that would have been it. No, best to keep a low profile." He paused, stroking Harry's cheek, the other arm wrapped around Deanna's shoulders. "But I couldn't help it, I wanted to see you two again."

Harry and Deanna couldn't help but smile, wrapping their arms around him and snuggling together. There was still a lot to be done, and the damage of the past wouldn't go away overnight, but things were very definitely on the up and up. Promises were made, and a rota worked out for people to take it in turns to sneak food out to Sirius, and Harry promised to talk to Ron and get Wormtail off him. It was going to hurt Ron like hell, but Harry wasn't about to let his parents' murderer go so easily.

"Be careful, won't you Harry?" said Sirius. "He's sneaky and dangerous. I don't want you getting hurt."

"I'll try not to," said Harry. "Besides, he's wandless, isn't he?"

"I wouldn't put it past him to steal one," said Sirius darkly. "Have Marlie there in her cat form if you can - strength in numbers and all that."

"Tell Hermione as well," Deanna added. "She's smart and good in a crisis." She noticed the guilty look on Marlie's face, and the looks everyone else was giving her. "What? Something up?"

"It would appear that in order to get access to Gryffindor, Marlie's been masquerading as Hermione's pet cat all year," said Luella. "A pet cat to whom Hermione has become very attached."

"Ah."

"Ah indeed."

"I'm sorry!" Marlie pleaded. "It was the only way I could think of. I didn't plan for it to go as far as it did - I didn't think I'd end up having to come back that often." She shot a sharp look at Sirius.

"Well, I guess we can't let Hermione in all the way then," Deanna sighed. "Damn shame, that would have been useful. Guess you and Harry are on your own."

"It'll be enough," said Harry, fingering the map, his father's map as he now knew it to be. "It has to be."

And so, determined to find Wormtail and sort this out once and for all, Harry made his way back to Gryffindor Tower, with Marlie the cat

following behind him. He didn't blame her for wanting to be in at the kill. Having witnessed the cat's vendetta against Scabbers all year, and knowing now the reason behind it, it only seemed right to have her there now. Checking the map again to make sure Pettigrew was still tucked safely away in the dormitory, he noted the rat's presence, wondering why on earth he'd never thought to look at the Gryffindor dorms on the map before. Pettigrew's name was right there if you cared to look. Sighing at his own lack of forethought, he cleared the map and rounded the corner, folding the parchment and just about to put it away, when Marlie meowed sharply in warning, and a tall dark figure emerged from the shadows.

"Well, well, Mr. Potter," Snape gloated. "I wondered when you'd care to rejoin us."

Harry closed his eyes. Of all the times to get picked up by Snape. He was distantly aware of the cat slipping away, presumably to report back to Luella and Deanna.

"My office, Potter," said Snape. "Now."

Chapter Thirty

The Gathering Storm

As soon as Marlie burst into the dorm, the other two girls knew that things had not gone according to plan. Deanna was on her feet in seconds, wand out and axe Summoned to her.

"What happened?" she asked. "Pettigrew, did he get away? Is someone hurt? Harry, is he OK?"

"We didn't even get as far as Gryffindor," Marlie sighed. "Snape turned up, didn't he? Dragged Harry off to his office. God knows why."

"He was in Hogsmeade," Deanna groaned, putting the axe down as she sank on to the bed. "Wearing his cloak, of course, but it didn't stop him from having a little run-in with Malfoy, did it? Apparently the cloak came loose and the hood slipped down while he and Ron were throwing mud at Malfoy and company. Harry had legged it back to school and was hiding from Snape when I found him. That's when he showed me the map and we saw Sirius on it and well, we all know what happened then. I'd completely forgotten about Snape."

"Understandable," said Luella. She was sitting on the edge of her bed, looking resigned to the fate that was pointing inevitably at her. "Well, I suppose I'll have to go and rescue him. Oh god, I hope he cleared the map, if Snape gets hold of that, we're screwed and so is Sirius."

Deanna went pale at that, and Marlie actually cried out. They hadn't thought about that – if Snape saw Sirius's name on the map, the game was up.

"It's alright," said Luella, grabbing her bag. "I'll get the map back off him. Don't worry. Just stay there." With that, she was gone.

"Oh god," Marlie whimpered, collapsing on her bed with her head in her hands. "Oh god, Padfoot, please be alright, please don't get found out, not now, please!"

Deanna watched her carefully, the thoughts that had occurred to her earlier crystallising into certainties.

"You like him, don't you?"

"He's a pain in the arse," said Marlie vehemently. "He's annoying, self-absorbed, irresponsible, impulsive, he drives me nuts and I swear he's prematurely ageing me."

"But you still like him," Deanna pressed. "I mean, really like him."

Marlie looked away awkwardly, staring at her fingernails. Deanna threw up her hands, exasperated.

"Oh for god's sake, Marls, I have eyes! I am not stupid! I saw the way you reacted when you saw he was in danger, and afterwards! I might not ever have had a relationship myself, but I can tell when two people are in love, and you and Sirius certainly are, aren't you?"

"Oh god," Marlie whispered. "I – I'm so sorry, I didn't... I didn't mean to. We – we're not an item or anything, we just... oh god." She shrank back, face scarlet, trying to shield herself from the hex that must surely be coming her way any time soon.

It didn't. Marlie was finally brave enough to open her eyes. Deanna was watching her, the ghost of a smile on her face, but sadness in her eyes.

"It's alright," Deanna sighed. "I'm not going to throw a fit or anything."

"But..." This went against all previous experience Marlie had of Deanna. "He's your dad!" she cried, wondering what on earth was going on and why Deanna hadn't cursed her into oblivion yet.

"He hasn't been my dad for a very long time," Deanna said softly, coming to sit next to her on the bed. "And... it wasn't two hours ago I was trying to kill him. I know he's forgiven me for it, but..." she took a deep breath, "Marls, I don't think I can forgive myself. It's going to take a while to get over the guilt and get things even remotely normal

between us, and even then, I don't think we're going to be a proper father-daughter team again, if ever. Too much has changed, and I'm too used to not having a father-figure around. And if that's the case with me, it goes double for Mum. She didn't just try and kill him, she believed he was guilty and abandoned him to Azkaban. I don't think he can forgive that so easily, and I know she won't be able to forgive herself. She's like me in that respect."

"Deanna, don't, it might still happen," Marlie began, fighting a particularly snide part of herself that was secretly punching the air.

"Not bloody likely, he's gone and fallen in love with you, hasn't he?" Deanna snapped. Marlie flinched away from her, and Deanna's expression instantly softened. "Oh look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to sound like that. But you've got to admit, it is pretty weird. My mate is seeing someone old enough to be her father, who also happens to be my ex-stepdad."

"Could only happen to us, couldn't it?" said Marlie, trying to smile.

"Yeah," Deanna sighed, starting to smile herself. "Oh bloody hell. Marls. Tell me the truth. Is he in love with you?"

Marlie nodded. "Yeah. He is. Told me this morning, actually. God, that seems like ages ago."

"How romantic," said Deanna, rolling her eyes. "And you, are you in love with him?"

Now that was an interesting question. Marlie wasn't entirely sure herself. On the one hand, there was no denying that Sirius Black was the biggest pain in the arse she'd ever met, and the source of virtually all her problems. But on the other hand, there was the memory of that terrible moment that morning when she'd learnt that Sirius faced the Kiss if captured, and the realisation that if she lost him, she really didn't know what she'd do.

"Yeah," Marlie admitted. "I think I am. Oh god." She stared at her hands, her heart sinking as she realised it was true. Great. Now not only did she have responsibility for protecting him and keeping him out of trouble, she was stuck with him afterwards. *Damn you, Padfoot, I did not sign up for this when I agreed to help you!*

"You sound so enthusiastic about it too," Deanna grinned. "Honestly, Marls, you're meant to enjoy being in love, aren't you? Especially when you know he feels the same."

"Not when it's Sirius," Marlie sighed. "When it's Sirius, it feels more like a life sentence."

Luella raced out of Slytherin as fast as she could, her mind hastily concocting a story that would both get Harry off relatively lightly and more importantly get the map back. It was going to be a tall order, and her chances of getting Harry off scot-free were frankly looking slim. Still, it was his own fault for sneaking into Hogsmeade and getting caught in the first place.

She reached the door and carefully made use of Glamoury to conceal her real thoughts. Rumour had it that Snape was a practised Legilimens, and while she didn't think he made a habit out of using it on Slytherins, she wasn't taking any chances.

Knocking on the door, she pushed it open without waiting for an answer. On the table were a Zonko's bag, and Harry's folded Invisibility Cloak.

"Surely you don't need such a very *old* piece of parchment?" Snape was sneering at a very nervous-looking Harry. "Why don't I just throw it away?" He made as if to throw it in the fire.

"No!" both Harry and Luella cried in unison. Snape and Harry turned as one to face Luella, who neither had noticed come in.

“Miss Martin, does this have something to do with you?” said Snape, exasperated.

“Yes,” Luella admitted, praying inwardly that this would one day prove live-downable. “I found it in my bag on Valentine's Day – it was in an anonymous card. Rianne and Deanna reckoned it had a coded message in it somehow – we're still trying to decipher it. Harry,” and here she curled her lip in her best impersonation of Lucius Malfoy, “decided it would be fun to sneak up on me in his cloak and grab my bag for a laugh when I was on my way back from Hogsmeade. We did eventually get it back off him, but on checking it afterwards, discovered that was missing. Deanna reckons it's from Weasley and he's lost his nerve and asked Harry to nick it back.”

Snape, looking for all the world like he was trying to suppress a smile, raised an eyebrow at Harry. “Well, Potter? Is this true? Were you really trying to steal back Ronald Weasley's Valentine's message?”

“Um. Yeah,” Harry admitted, hoping Ron never found out about this. “Sorry, Luella.”

“Quite alright, Harry,” said Luella, her voice tight. “Sir, may I have it back, please? I'd quite like to know what it says.”

“Of course,” said Snape, a sadistic smile curving across his face. “If there is anything I can do to be of assistance in deciphering it, by all means let me know.” He passed her the parchment, and Luella, feeling oddly light-headed that her ploy had actually worked, folded it and pocketed it before he changed his mind.

“Well, Potter, it would seem that unfortunately there is no evidence to corroborate Malfoy's story,” Snape sighed, voice heavy with regret.

“He has been a bit off ever since the Hippogriff incident,” Luella put in. “Maybe he's got Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome or something. He always was a bit sensitive, and we all know he's got a very good imagination. It's possible he might have been imagining things – it gets dark early, and his mind might have been playing tricks.”

"Hmm," said Snape, dubious but unable to offer any real objections. "Well, in the absence of any evidence, I shall have to let you off this time, Potter. However," Snape lifted the silvery folds of the Invisibility Cloak, "running off with another student's property is not something I can allow to go unpunished. Ten points from Gryffindor, Potter, and this is staying here."

"No!" Harry cried, turning to Luella for assistance. Luella just shrugged. She'd done her best, and she'd got the Map back after all. The loss of the Cloak was regrettable, but not nearly as damaging as that map in the wrong hands. Snape, looking entirely too satisfied for his own good, began to fold the Cloak, making an elaborate show of it as he wrapped it up before theatrically placing it in one of his desk drawers and locking it shut with a satisfying click.

"Now," said Snape, turning back to Harry with a sadistic grin, "I trust I won't have to see you in here again this term?"

"You-" Harry began, but something told him that it wouldn't be worth it. Luella rested a hand on his shoulder.

"Come on, Harry," she said softly. "Let's go."

Without a word, and still numb from the loss of the cloak, Harry got up and followed her out.

Of course, numbness didn't last. As soon as they were far enough away from Snape's office, Harry turned on Luella.

"You let him take my cloak!" he yelled at her. "My dad's cloak!"

"Harry, calm down!" Luella snapped. "What was I meant to do, tell him he couldn't do it? He's my house head, Harry! I don't have the right to tell him what to do! You're lucky I got the map back for you. Yes, I know it's a shame about the cloak, but in the long run, the map's the key. Can you imagine if Snape found out how to work it? He'd see you-know-who on the map and it'd all be over. At least there's a limit to what he can do with the cloak."

"I still don't want him to have his greasy hands on my dad's cloak," Harry growled. "And this is Snape – he doesn't have to do much to cause trouble."

"Yeah, well, he doesn't know about this," said Luella, producing the map and passing it back to Harry. "And it's gonna stay that way."

Which was the exact moment Professor Lupin chose to come around the corner and stop dead, looking at them both very strangely. To be more precise, he was staring at the parchment in Luella's hands.

The same thought occurred to both children at the same time as they stared at Lupin in shock. *Professor Lupin. Werewolf. Moony. Marauder's Map. Oh hell.*

"Professor Lupin!" Luella managed to get out, hoping she sounded innocent while knowing deep down she sounded anything but. "What are you doing down here?"

"On my way to see Professor Snape – I need to collect a potion from him." His eyes had not left the Marauder's Map once. Still, it was possible he might not recognise it.

"Where did you get that map??" Lupin rasped, his normally pleasant tones harsher than normal.

Damn. "Map?" said Luella, her face a mask. "What, you mean this? Is it a map then, sir? I've no idea, I was just giving it back to Harry."

"It's a map," said Lupin, his eyes not leaving the parchment. "And it shouldn't be in your hands. It's far too dangerous for students to have. And no I don't want to know how you got it. Give it to me. Now, if you don't mind."

There was something in Lupin's eyes and voice that had a very dangerous undertone to it, and both Harry and Luella found themselves becoming uncomfortably aware that Professor Lupin was in fact a werewolf, that neither knew offhand what phase of the moon it

was, and Luella in particular had heard tales of feral werewolves that weren't just monsters during the Full Moon, but were willing to kill at other times; not because the moon made them but because they'd come to love the taste of blood. While Luella was fairly certain Lupin was not one of them, he could have been hiding it well, and it had been a long time since Sirius had known him after all. Harry seemed to be having similar thoughts, because this time he raised no objections as Luella handed the map over.

Lupin breathed a sigh of relief as he did so. "Thank you," he said, sounding rather more like himself as he folded and pocketed the map. "These are dangerous times, you know, and powerful magical artefacts like this are probably best kept out of sight. If Sirius Black got his hands on this, the damage he could do to this school would be incalculable. Now, I'm going back to my office to put this away somewhere safe. I trust you two can stay out of trouble?"

"Yes, sir," said Harry and Luella in unison, smiles fixed on their faces.

"Excellent," Lupin smiled, and now he seemed perfectly normal, nice and friendly Professor Lupin, except he had that map on him and he knew how to use it, and the danger was far, far worse than it had been when he'd had that feral look in his eyes. And there was nothing they could do about it except smile as he turned and left the way he had come. Somehow, they managed to restrain themselves until he had gone.

"Now what??" Harry hissed, furious. "We've lost cloak and map in an hour of each other! And don't tell me Lupin can't cause trouble – he knows exactly how to use it! What if he decides to have a look at it for old times' sake?? If we could see... him... on it, so will Professor Lupin!"

"It'll be alright," said Luella, although she didn't really believe it. "I'll get it back. I promise."

"Yeah, you keep saying that," Harry snapped. "And I keep losing my stuff, and my godfather's life is at stake!"

"I'll sort it out," said Luella, desperately trying to think of a plan. "I will! Look, Lupin was on his way to see Snape, right? Which means as soon as the map's safely away, he'll come back this way to get his potion. With the map in his office still."

"With the... go on." Harry had calmed down a little, and seemed willing to at least hear her out.

"Right. So I'll go back to the dorm, and get Deanna and Marls, while you go round up Ron and Hermione. Marls can go to the Shack and clear it out, while you three go and get Scabbers. I'll send Deanna to help with that – you'll need backup. Take him to McGonagall and change him back in front of her – Deanna knows the spell. He's wandless, so while he's still dangerous, I imagine the three of you plus Tyler and McGonagall can immobilise him until the Aurors get here."

"Oh trust me, we'll take care of it," said Harry firmly, fingering his wand in anticipation. "And you, what are you going to do?"

"Break into Lupin's office," said Luella. "I've got me a map to steal."

Deanna and Marlie looked up as Luella slammed the door open. One look at her told them things had not gone well.

"What happened?" asked Deanna, reaching for her wand.

"Did you get the map?" Marlie asked hopefully. Luella's face was all the answer she needed. "Oh god. Has Snape still got it? He hasn't figured out how it works yet, has he?"

Luella shook her head. "No. Worse. Lupin has it. I don't think he's looked at it yet, but it's only a matter of time."

Marlie shrieked, grabbing her hair. "Sirius!" she moaned. "Oh god! He'll be caught!"

"Not if he's not on the grounds when Lupin looks at the map," said Luella. "But you don't have a lot of time. Go. Now. Get him out of here."

Marlie did not waste any more time. Without a word, she'd transformed and bolted out of the door before anyone else could move.

"She'll get him out of there," said Deanna confidently. She turned to Luella. "What do we do?"

"Harry's going to get Ron and Hermione to take Scabbers to McGonagall," said Luella. "They'll need backup. Up for it?"

Deanna pocketed her wand. "Consider me there."

Sirius sat up as Marlie burst through the trap door into the Shack. This was far too soon, and the wild look in her eyes was all Sirius needed to see to know that things had gone mammaries upwards, as James always used to say.

"Oh god. What happened? No one's hurt, are they?" If Wormtail had laid a finger on Harry or Deanna, Sirius would not only kill him but learn necromancy and corpse reanimation for the sole purpose of bringing Wormtail back so he could have the pleasure of killing him again. Painfully.

Marlie shook her head, close to panic. "No, but... oh Sirius, Professor Lupin's got the Marauder's Map!"

Yep. Nipples vertical alright. Sirius closed his eyes. It was always a risk, had always been a risk ever since he'd learned Moony was working the Defence job... but now it had actually happened, Sirius found himself, not afraid but almost pleased. Yes, Moony would surely find out, then maybe they could join forces, form a pack again... *Stop that at once, he's more likely to turn you in!* Sirius shook himself out of it, survival instincts kicking in. He couldn't afford to be getting sentimental now. He didn't need Marlie to tell him to get the hell out of Dodge.

“Buggeration, Marls, how the hell- oh never mind, it's not going to help. How long ago was this?”

“I – I'm not sure,” stammered Marlie. “About twenty minutes ago?”

“Twenty minutes. Well, that's not too bad. He's probably not scrolled out this far yet. This is bad, but not the end of the world. If I move quickly, even if he sees me, I can be in the Forbidden Forest before he can get out of the school. He's not going to follow me in there in a hurry, and as soon as it's dark I can get out of town on Bucky. Easy.” Without another word, he began summoning and shrinking his possessions, packing them into the bag and silently thanking whatever deities were out there that most of his stuff was still unpacked.

“I'll help-” Marlie began, but found herself cut off as Sirius turned around.

“No. You need to get out of here and you need to do it now. Bad enough if Moony sees me on the map, but it will be far worse if he sees us together.”

Marlie went even paler at that, nodding agreement. “OK,” she whispered. “Oh Sirius, do be careful!” She flung her arms around Sirius, fighting tears. Sirius held her tight, enjoying the moment while he still could. He had a feeling there wouldn't be many like this for some time.

“Aren't I always?” he whispered, trying to smile. Marlie didn't answer. She just held him that bit tighter. Finally, Sirius released her.

“Go,” he said softly. “Get out of here. Go find Wormtail for me.” He kissed her on the cheek, not trusting himself with anything more. Marlie returned the gesture, before transforming and disappearing down the trapdoor. Sirius watched her go, before returning to the packing. He'd got this far, further than he'd ever dreamed he would. He wasn't going to let Moony or anyone else stop him now.

Harry was waiting outside Gryffindor Tower when Deanna caught up with him.

“Ready?” Deanna asked, fingering her wand. Harry nodded.

“Yeah. Think they're back by now, the common room sounds pretty busy.”

Sure enough, the noise of nearly a hundred young Gryffindors shouting and laughing was echoing through the walls and out into the corridor. Deanna couldn't help but feeling a little bit smug – Slytherin was never this noisy except when there was a party going on.

“OK. I'll wait here, keep an eye out. You go in and get them.”

Harry nodded and went in, leaving the door ajar so Deanna could hear what was going on, barely. She could just about hear Ron greeting Harry, then a few words of chit chat that she couldn't make out, then Ron going “Rat pox? Are you sure? But Scabbers is about the only pet rat here, how's he going to get it? What, wild rats? Hogwarts doesn't have any of those in the castle, not up here, surely?”

At this point Hermione butted in, her tones carrying across loud and clear. “For god's sake, Ron, it's obviously a risk or McGonagall wouldn't be insisting on vaccinating him, would she? Honestly, it's not like you have to pay for it or anything, and how would you feel if Scabbers did get rat pox and died?”

“Alright, alright, bloody hell,” Ron sighed, and traipsed off to his room to retrieve the rat. Deanna found herself smiling at Harry's ingenuity. Rat pox, indeed. She wasn't even sure there was such a disease. She was surprised even Hermione didn't seem to have noticed, but then again, if the order had come from McGonagall, Hermione's adoration of her mentor would have kicked in and all knowledge to the contrary would have been ruthlessly shoved aside.

A few minutes passed. Then the air was rent by a horrified cry. A horrified male cry. Ron Weasley. Deanna felt her heart skip a beat. Had Wormtail twigged that they were on to him and gone for Ron?

Footsteps, then the sound of Ron shouting eased that fear at least. Ron seemed, not scared, but furious.

"Gone!!! He's *gone!*" Ron was practically screaming. "Dead! Killed! Eaten! And do you know what by? Do you?"

Deanna dared a peek around the door. It surely wasn't safe for a Slytherin to be so close to the Gryffindor heartland, but somehow, she had a feeling her presence would go unnoticed.

In the centre of the room, Ron was advancing on a pale and trembling Hermione. In his hand was a Gryffindor bed sheet, spattered with blood... and adorned with long, white cat hairs.

"He's been eaten by *your bloody cat!*" Ron screamed at her, waving the sheet in her face, his face white with rage. Hermione stared at the sheet, then at him, lip trembling and looking like she was about to burst into tears. Then, before her self-control could snap completely, she turned and bolted for the door. Deanna barely had time to leap away and flatten herself against the wall before Hermione burst out of the common room and ran away down the corridor. She was soon followed by Harry, who staggered out of the door and stood there, horror writ large on his face.

"Now what?" Harry whispered. "We don't know where he's gone. He could be anywhere. Do you reckon he knows we're on to him?"

Deanna shook her head. "How could he? Unless he was eavesdropping at the Shack, but he would have to have already left Gryffindor Tower for that."

"Well, that's something," sighed Harry. "So now what?"

“We hope Marlie did her bit in time. And we hope Lu gets the map back – if we can get our hands on it again, we'll be able to track him down in no time.”

“That's an awful lot of hoping and waiting, Deanna,” Harry frowned. Like most Gryffindors, Harry didn't take kindly to not being able to do anything. “Isn't there anything we can do?”

“Well, I suppose we can try and sort this mess out at least,” Deanna sighed. “Listen, you go and talk to Ron, I'll go and see where Hermione's gone. If we can get them talking and try and convince them that 'Cleo' couldn't possibly have done it because she wasn't there, that'll be something at least.”

“OK,” Harry nodded as he stepped back into Gryffindor Tower, looking far from certain, but pleased at least to be doing something. As she headed downstairs, idly wondering where Hermione's hangouts were, Deanna could only wish she were doing something a bit more helpful in freeing her erstwhile stepfather.

Ron, having vented his misery on Hermione, had retreated to the privacy of the Gryffindor boys' dormitory. Harry found him sitting on his bed, clutching the sheet and facing the window. As he heard Harry come in, he quickly sniffed, tried to cover it with a cough and rubbed his face as if scratching an itch. Harry wasn't fooled but tactfully decided not to mention anything.

“Hey. Ron. You alright, mate?”

“Yeah,” came the muffled response. “Yeah, s'fine.”

“Yeah. Course,” said Harry, wishing Luella was there, or indeed, anyone with a better idea of what to do when their best mate was upset and said best mate was needed to help them do something. “Course you are. Um. I'm sorry about Scabbers, mate. I know you really liked him.”

Ron just snorted. "Doesn't matter," he said, voice numb. "He was just a rat. I don't care he got eaten." This would have sounded more impressive if it hadn't been followed by a sniff and Ron rubbing at one of his eyes.

"No. No, course you don't," said Harry, wondering how to get the subject on to Hermione without Ron thinking he was an insensitive pillock. "Um. Ron. I sort of need your help."

Ron did turn around at that, although Harry noticed that he barely seemed to care. "Yeah? What's up?"

"Well, nothing much, not really," said Harry, shuffling his feet nervously. "Just something I heard while you were all in Hogsmeade."

"Yeah? What was that then?" Despite himself, a note of curiosity had crept into Ron's voice. Had Harry been Slytherin, he would have noticed this and grinned to himself at the realisation that he had Ron right where he wanted. Being Gryffindor however, he didn't.

"It might be nothing. It's just a rumour."

"It might not be." Ron was sounding more curious by the second. "Go on, tell me. Is it about one of the Slytherins?"

Harry shook his head. "No. Listen, I went to see Hagrid while you were out, and first thing he did was pack me off back here personally. Apparently there's a rumour Black was seen on the grounds earlier. They're not telling anyone because they don't want to cause a panic, but they're not letting people wander around on their own either."

Ron shrugged. "And? Harry, I'm not going after him with you. Let the Aurors get on with it. It's their job."

Harry shook his head. "No, it's not that! Listen, Hermione's out there on her own. Suppose he finds her?"

“Thought you said they weren't letting people out on their own?” Ron pointed out. Harry mentally cursed him – why did Ron have to pick now of all times to start spotting flaws in people's logic?

“Yeah, but Hermione's smart, isn't she? She wants to be alone, she's going to have no problems getting past the teachers. Ron, please,” said Harry, getting desperate. After all, it wasn't far from the truth, Hermione really was out there alone, and there really was a dangerous mass murderer on the loose, even if it wasn't Sirius. “Last year, I let Hermione go running off on her own with a monster on the loose, and she got Petrified. If Marlie hadn't been there with a mirror on hand, she'd have been killed. I don't want it to happen again!”

Ron muttered something under his breath, but Harry did have a point, and angry though he was at Hermione, he didn't want to see her dead.

“Come on then,” he sighed, picking his wand up. “Let's go find her.”

However, despite her two best friends and a Slytherin prefect on the hunt for her, it wasn't any of them who found Hermione first. It was a small white cat, dashing out of the Whomping Willow and making its way back to the school who saw her first, staggering out of the Entrance Hall with tears rolling down her face.

Marlie froze on seeing Hermione. That was all she needed. She'd hoped to slip back inside, trace Deanna or Luella, shift back and assist whoever she found first with whatever they were doing, be it map theft or rat retrieval. Not encounter Hermione in a state of some distress on her way who knew where. She could only hope that Hermione was too upset to notice her. Unfortunately, her coat colour was not conducive to camouflage.

“Cleo!” Hermione gasped, eyes falling on her. “There you are! Oh, Cleo, what have you done? Ron's going to kill us both!” She bit her lip, looking as if she was about to cry again.

It would have taken a harder heart than Marlie's to do what her head was telling her, which was to turn tail and run. But Marlie had spent too much time curled up in Hermione's lap, being stroked, being tickled, having her chin scratched and her head rubbed. Despite everything, a loyalty to the young Gryffindor had sprung up, and Marlie just didn't have it in her to abandon Hermione when she was clearly upset. That and part of her was curious – why was Ron so furious with them both? She wouldn't find out by running away, that was for certain. Mewing hopefully, she ran over to Hermione, who scooped her up in her arms.

“Oh Cleo,” Hermione whispered as she headed for the lake, her arms full of cat and her heart full of despair. “What are we going to do?”

It was there that Deanna found them, Hermione curled up under a tree with tears rolling down her face and the cat in her arms.

“There you are,” she said, unable to disguise the relief in her voice. While she could hardly be said to be one of Hermione's friends – the two girls barely knew each other after all, and had rarely exchanged more than a few words – she'd always had a certain respect for the young Gryffindor. Deanna had always been an admirer of strength and intelligence, and Hermione certainly had both of those.

Hermione for her part had no particular enmity towards Deanna either, and did not react as the older girl came to sit next to her.

“Harry told me what had happened with you and Ron,” Deanna said, after a short pause in which both seemed not to know what to say. “Are you alright?”

Hermione's face crumpled and she began to sob in earnest. Almost instinctively, Deanna found herself putting an arm around her and drawing her into a hug. Hermione did not resist, burying her face in Deanna's robes and wrapping her own arms around Deanna's waist, levering the cat into Deanna's lap as she did so. Deanna, grinning, scratched the cat behind the ears, shooting it a wink. The cat glared up

at her, but there was no real anger there. They remained like that for some time, the two girls and the cat, until Hermione broke the silence.

"What do I do now?" she whispered. "I mean, it's not my fault, anyone who's ever owned a cat knows you can't control them, can't stop them from hunting unless you lock them up, and I can't do that to Cleo, I just can't."

Deanna knew all too well that Hermione would have had great difficulty indeed in keeping Cleo prisoner.

"I know," she sighed. "But I don't think Ron's ever had a cat, though. He's got no idea about pets you can't keep on a leash, in a tank or in a pocket. Besides, he's very attached to his rat. Understandable he was going to be upset."

"But it's not my fault!" Hermione cried. "And Cleo can't help being what she is. She's a cat, they chase rodents, it's not her fault either! Why can't he see that? Why does he have to be so... so bloody *stupid*?"

"I know, I know," Deanna soothed her. "He's being a total arse about this, I completely agree with you. But he has just had a nasty shock. It's not every day you come back to find your rat's gone and looks like it's been eaten by your friend's cat." Here, she gave Cleo a particularly pointed look. Cleo for her part had sat bolt upright on hearing this and, letting out a pained meow, was now staring intently at Deanna, ears pricked. "He'll probably get over it eventually, but I imagine you'll have to do a bit of apologising and grovelling. Yes, I know it's not your fault," she put a finger to Hermione's lips to forestall the inevitable complaint, "but you can still apologise for his hurt feelings, and on Cleo's behalf. You could also ward Gryffindor Tower against her and send her back to her real owner. Might make Ron feel better too. But that's just an option to consider," she added hastily, as Hermione sat up in indignation. Hermione frowned at Deanna but decided not to press the point.

"Come on," said Deanna gently, getting to her feet and extending a hand to Hermione. "Let's go back inside. We can hang out in the library

if you want. It's getting cold and it'll be dark soon." There was also the little matter of Wormtail being loose on the grounds, but Deanna decided this was best not mentioned. Hermione's afternoon had been trying enough. She still seemed a bit upset, but at least she was no longer crying. Nodding, Hermione got to her feet, letting Cleo go. The cat shook her fur out and glanced around nervously as if watching for something. However, she soon followed as the two girls began to walk back to Hogwarts.

They hadn't gone far when Harry and Ron dashed out of the school, wands out. They both skidded to a halt when they saw Hermione, alive and well and guarded by one of the more dangerous Slytherin prefects.

"There you are," said Harry, genuinely relieved to see Hermione was all right. "We were worried about you, weren't we, Ron?"

Ron just glared, scuffing one of his feet on the ground. Harry sighed and turned back to the girls, having evidently decided that he wasn't going to get any support from Ron in this sort of mood.

"Worried about me?" Hermione snorted. "Were you really." She folded her arms and returned Ron's sulky glares with a few pointed looks of her own.

"We heard rumours Sirius Black had been seen near the grounds," said Harry softly. "We wanted to make sure you were OK." Ron was still scowling, but he did glance up at this, a tiny hint of worry in his eyes.

Hermione's gaze did soften a little, but only a little. "Thanks," she said, her eyes firmly locked on Harry. "But I'm all right, Deanna found me and we were just going inside."

"Yeah, I know, I sent her to find you," said Harry, smiling. "I ran into her after I followed you out of Gryffindor, and she offered to go and bring you inside after I told her about Scabbers." Ron flinched as Harry said the name.

“Yes, Harry did tell me what had happened,” said Deanna, rather frostily. “I must say, it does look a little odd from a neutral perspective. All you found was a bit of blood on the sheet and cat hairs. The blood could have been anything. Could have been yours, even – we’ve all had spots bleed in the night, haven’t we? If Cleo really had killed your rat, there’d be more than a few drops of blood, I can tell you. Trust me, I share a dorm with two cats, I’ve had to deal with more than my fair share of dead rodent clear ups. Besides, that common room wasn’t empty. Has anyone even seen Cleo over there this afternoon?” The answer to which question, of course, would only be no, as Deanna knew all too well. “Did you even bother to ask? No, of course not, because that would require *thinking*.” She gave Ron a look which said all too clearly what she thought of his abilities in that department. So busy was she making Ron look uncomfortable that she barely noticed Cleo turn around and freeze, fixing intently on something behind her. Harry, however, did and his eyes followed the cat’s gaze, coming to an abrupt halt as he saw what had so fascinated her.

“There’s another very good reason Cleo couldn’t have killed Scabbers, Ron,” said Harry delicately, licking his lips in an attempt to get some saliva back into his suddenly very dry mouth.

“Yeah? What’s that?” muttered Ron, still scowling. Harry pointed in the direction Cleo was staring furiously at.

“Because he’s over there.”

Luella meanwhile was covered in the best concealing Glamours she could contrive, taking care to cover not just vision, but sound and scent as well. She was a little vague on the details of werewolf abilities, but she definitely recalled that close to the Full Moon, all a werewolf’s senses were sharper, as the Beast within began to make its presence felt. Of course, she couldn’t recall off the top of her head whether it was Full Moon, New Moon or Waxing Gibbous, and she didn’t have time to find out, but it was better to be safe than sorry. And so she made her

way to Lupin's office, confident she was as well hidden as she could be. She just hoped it would be enough.

Bending down, she peered through the keyhole in his office door. Lupin was sitting at his desk, the map spread out in front of him as he gazed at it in wonder, a smile playing around his lips. There could be no doubt that Moony was surveying his handiwork, impressed that it had lasted so well. Briefly, Luella toyed with the idea of Summoning it out of his hands, pocketing the map and running away before he could catch her, but her Slytherin mind dismissed the notion as too straightforward. Had it not done so, this story would have had a different ending entirely, but it is too late to dwell on such matters now. Luella did not act, not until Lupin frowned and glanced up, looking right at her. Luella, suppressing a gasp, immediately sprang backwards, moving rapidly away from the door and strengthening her Glamours as Lupin got up and walked towards the door. He opened it, stared right at her for a moment, frowned again and glanced up and down the corridor before, seeing no one there, he shrugged and returned to his desk. This time, however, he left the door open. Luella, seizing her chance, stepped forward again, knowing she might not get another opportunity like this. *Please, Professor. Go and see Professor Snape for your potion. Leave the map here. Please.*

Lupin didn't so much as move. Growing impatient, Luella crept up behind him, standing behind his chair, wondering what he found so interesting. It was just a map, after all, and what was so fascinating about daily life at Hogwarts? Of course, her mind immediately came up with half a dozen answers to that one, none of which stood up to any form of ethical scrutiny, so she ruthlessly shoved them aside. Still, she was curious... Edging nearer, she peered over his shoulder to see what he was looking at.

There were evidently more features to the map than met the eye, because he'd magnified one part of it, the part he was looking at most. Luella peered closer, trying to identify it... and felt her heart skip a beat as she realised it was this very classroom. That was nothing, however, when she realised that the map wasn't fooled by glamours, and behind

the dot marked "Remus Lupin" was another dot, clearly labelled "Luella Martin".

Luella froze for just one second, before her legs took the decision for her, and she turned and ran. Unfortunately she'd hesitated a moment too long, and before she could move, Lupin had spun round and grabbed her by the wrist.

The glammers broke instantly – it would have taken a master Glamourer indeed to hold up in the face of that amount of proof they weren't real – and Luella found herself face to face with a presumably not too pleased werewolf.

"Glamoury," Lupin murmured. "Very impressive. That's a rare talent nowadays. You're very good. Sadly, not quite good enough – there was a Glamourer at school when this was made too, and I believe the manufacturers took that into account when they designed it."

Luella didn't reply. Her mind had gone blank, and the animal part of her was screaming at her to run, get away from him, he was dangerous. Whimpering, she struggled in his grip, desperate to get away.

"Not so fast, Luella," said Lupin softly. "I want to know why you're sneaking up on a Hogwarts professor in what I can only presume is some kind of attempt at retrieving confiscated property, and why you're so desperate to get your hands on this map – well, I think we know the answer to the last one, don't we? It is a work of some skill, isn't it? I can quite see why you'd want it. But badly enough to steal it back, and so quickly after it's been confiscated? You're a Prefect, Luella, you're not the type to go against teachers like this and we both know it, don't we? And even if you were, you're a Slytherin, not a Gryffindor. You'd wait and bide your time. You wouldn't execute a badly-planned rush job like this, would you?" Luella could only cry out as he shook her. "There's far more to this than meets the eye, isn't there?" Lupin said softly, dangerously. "And you're going to tell me what it is. Aren't you?" He gave another shake. Luella, close to panic, frantically racked her brains, looking for a way out. There didn't seem to be one. Lupin was physically strong, and weren't werewolves resistant to magic close to

the full moon? She tried to think of a weak spot... and then inspiration struck.

"Because... because there's no way..." she gasped, "that I'm leaving a dangerous magical artefact like that in *your* hands, *Moony*."

Lupin froze, staring at her in horror... before she found herself pinned back against the classroom wall with her hands pinned above her head.

"*Where did you find out that name??*" Lupin hissed, face inches from hers.

"Doesn't matter," Luella said, trying not to let her terror show. She had him and he knew it, and she didn't think he'd really hurt her, not if Sirius had been right about him anyway. "But people know about you, Professor, and I'm not the only one either. We know why you're really off sick every month. We know you're an old friend of Sirius Black's. And we're not letting you have that map so you can keep on helping him get into the school!"

Lupin really did lose his temper at that. Roaring, he dragged her by the wrists and slammed her down on to the desk.

"I am *not helping him get in!*" he snarled at her.

"Someone is!" Luella snapped, praying he wasn't a Legilimens. "If not you, who?"

"I don't know!" said Lupin, and the anger seemed to go out of his voice a little. "But I imagine that if anyone is helping him, they're more likely to be a housemate of yours than anyone else."

Truer than you can possibly know, Professor. But Luella wisely didn't say anything, opting to simply stare defiantly up at him instead. However, he wasn't looking at her any more. He was staring at one edge of the map. Hauling her to her feet, he zoomed out and scrolled out to the grounds, frowning.

“Professor?” Luella asked, her heart in her mouth. *Oh no. Please no. Don't let him have seen Sirius.* He'd let her go in his distracted state, and she reached for her wand, prepared to Stun or Oblivate if she had to. Reading over his shoulder, she saw the little group of dots clustered not far outside. Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, Deanna Tyler, Marlie Lovegood. Nothing too unusual there, although someone who knew them well might wonder why Hermione was standing in between Marlie and Deanna, facing her two friends instead of standing with them and facing the two Slytherins. However, it was not those dots that had Lupin's attention. It was the other dot mere inches away that had his attention; the dot labelled 'Peter Pettigrew'.

“Can't be,” Lupin breathed, shaking his head. “That's not possible! It can't possibly be you, Sirius killed you...” He traced a finger over the dot. The label was in firm bold text, not the ethereal italicised text that labelled the castle ghosts. “But you're not dead... so Sirius didn't kill you... but why would a deranged Dark wizard have spared your life? And why would an escaped hero that survived an attack by one not have come forward sooner? It doesn't make sense!” He pounded the desk in frustration, before something occurred to him and he turned to look at Luella... who was not flinching back in fear and confusion as he might have expected, but looking back at him clear-eyed, nodding at his reasoning.

“You know, don't you,” Lupin whispered. “You knew Pettigrew was alive!” Luella nodded.

“He faked his own death,” she said. “He killed all those Muggles in the process, and let Sirius take the rap. Sirius was trying to kill him all right, but wouldn't you want to kill the person who'd just betrayed your entire family to their deaths?”

Lupin stared at her, his face deathly pale. “Where did you hear all this??” he gasped. Luella sighed. No help but to tell him the whole truth now.

“He did,” she said. “Sirius did.”

“Sirius- you've met Sirius?” If Lupin had been shocked before, that was nothing compared to how he looked now. “How is he- I mean, is he all right? Has he – has he mentioned me?” The desperation in Lupin's eyes told Luella all she needed to know.

“He's not bad for a man on the run,” she told him, smiling. “But we don't have any time to lose. Sooner we bring in Pettigrew the better.”

Lupin nodded brusquely. “You're quite right.” He turned to the map, giving it one last look... and froze. Luella didn't like the look of that. What had he seen? Following his gaze, she saw that Peter Pettigrew was on the move, hotly pursued by Marlie. Behind her, Ron and Harry seemed frozen in place, while Deanna and Hermione were after Marlie. But that wasn't what had grabbed Lupin's attention. Pettigrew was heading for the Whomping Willow... where another dot had just emerged. A dot labelled 'Sirius Black'.

Chapter Thirty One

Rat, Cat and Dog

Lupin traced Sirius's name in awe, fingers seeming to almost caress the letters.

"Padfoot," he whispered, hesitating for the briefest of instants, before turning and making for the door.

"Profess - Professor, wait!" Luella cried. Lupin stopped, glancing over his shoulder.

"Yes?"

Luella picked the map up. "Take this and me with you. I can help you and Sirius, and this really shouldn't be left unattended."

Lupin did have the grace to look a little sheepish at that. "Ah. Yes, of course, you're quite right. I do apologise, it's just the shock of seeing them both and knowing..." He stopped, unwilling to say any more. Luella nodded, understanding all too well. If it had been her and Deanna, or Rianne, or even Marls, she'd probably have done the same. Lupin extended an arm to her. "Would you do me the honour of accompanying me?"

Luella smiled, and stepped forward, passing him the map before linking her right arm in his and drawing a glamour over them both.

"I'd love to. Let's go."

After a good minute or two spent knocking on Lupin's door with no response, Snape finally tried the handle out of sheer frustration, and found it unlocked. Snarling, Snape strode in, ready to give Lupin a piece of mind over why he'd been sitting in his office listening to him knock without answering or giving any indication he was there... and found the room empty.

"Lupin?" Snape called, frowning. This was most unusual. No teacher left their office open and unattended for long, if at all, and Lupin was normally very good about securing his things. Seven years spent sharing a dormitory with three notorious pranksters did that to one. "Lupin? Are you there? Lupin!" Muttering to himself, he cast a short-range locator charm. Nothing. There was no one else in this room. Wearily, Snape sat down in Lupin's chair, resting the goblet of Wolfsbane on the desk. As if the afternoon spent consoling Malfoy and chasing after Potter hadn't been tiring enough, he now had an errant werewolf on his hands. Snape was tempted to leave the potion on his desk and go back to his own quarters, but that wasn't really an option. Full Moon started tonight, and Lupin had to have that potion or he'd be a danger to the school and everything in it. He wouldn't be able to rest easily until he'd seen Lupin drink it himself. Which meant having to track down the wretched creature. Sighing he got up, goblet in one hand, wand in the other.

"Point me Remus Lupin!"

The wand swivelled, pointing towards the door. Snape followed it, grimacing. When he finally got hold of Remus Lupin, the werewolf wouldn't know what had hit him.

When Harry had pointed out Scabbers, several things had happened at once. As one, everyone had turned to look, and sure enough, a rat bearing a striking resemblance to Ron's pet was making its way across the grounds. Cleo had immediately sprung into action, chasing after the rat, which on seeing her had squeaked, turned and fled.

"Cleo!" Hermione cried, racing after the cat.

"Oh bloody hell, Granger!" Deanna shouted, her face going pale. Drawing her wand, she took off after Hermione, real fear in her eyes. Harry noticed the look in her eyes and felt for his own wand. For Deanna to look that worried was not good news.

"Scabbers!" Ron shouted, furious as he brandished his wand. "Get that bloody cat away from him!" Aiming at the cat, he prepared to cast a hex... at least until Harry grabbed him from behind, clutching at Ron's wrist with one hand while holding him pressed next to Harry with the other. Confused, Ron struggled in Harry's arms.

"Harry, what the hell, let me go!" Ron demanded.

"Can't!" said Harry through gritted teeth. "Ron, if you hurt that cat, you'll regret it!"

"I bloody won't!" Wriggling out of Harry's grip, he turned to face his friend, hurt and confused. "Harry, what the hell is up with you? When did you become Mr. Animal Lover??"

"Ron, I don't have time to explain," said Harry, wondering why life always had to be so damn complicated. "Just... trust me. You don't want to hurt that cat. It wouldn't be a good idea. I promise I will tell you everything when we've sorted all this out, but in the mean time, will you just trust me, and leave the cat alone?"

Ron looked very dubious at this, and if Harry hadn't been his best mate, he would certainly have argued. However, he lowered his wand and nodded.

"Alright. But as soon as this is all sorted, you're going to tell me what the hell is going on, and it had better be good!"

"Oh it is. Believe me," said Harry firmly. "Now come on! Deanna and Hermione are going to need help."

Ron, bewildered as to why two witches with the power and intelligence of Hermione Granger and Deanna Tyler would need help with two pet animals, could only shrug and follow Harry. He certainly wasn't going to get any answers otherwise.

Sirius stuck his head out of the Willow, nose sniffing the air. It seemed clear enough - no Dementors, no powerful magic other than what was normal for the area, no squad of Aurors Apparating in. All seemed well. Feeling, if not safe, at least not immediately threatened, Sirius emerged from the passageway, shaking his fur off and preparing to dart off towards the Forest. Before he did so, he took one last look around at the place that had been home for the last few months, and a place of fond memories for a lot longer than that.

And it was then that he felt it - the tingle of magic that signified another Animagus. Then he felt another one - from someone else. Both magical signatures were known to him too - one a beloved friend, one a hated enemy. Sirius looked up, and now their scents were on the breeze, and then he saw them, the grey rat leading the way, and the white cat chasing after it. And behind both of them, two girls, one a Gryffindor in her early teens who Sirius didn't recognise, and the other an all too familiar older Slytherin.

Sirius felt a lump forming in his throat. *Oh gods, Deanna get away from him, get your Gryffindor friend away from here, you don't know what he's capable of...* Growling, he began to run forward.

The rat saw him and stopped, frozen in its tracks, staring at him in horror. Behind it, the cat had also skidded to a halt and had started yowling at him, a high-pitched wail that roughly translated meant *What are you doing here, you idiot, get to the Forest, get away!*

Can't do that, kitten. Not now. Not with him right there. This ends tonight, one way or another. A low growl emanated from his throat as he began to pace slowly towards the terrified rat. The cat let out another panicked cry, while the Gryffindor had stopped, watching in confusion. Deanna had by this time caught up with her, and Sirius could hear the younger girl asking what on earth was going on. Deanna shushed her and the two of them watched as the rat found itself stalked by angry dog on one side and a rather purposeful-looking cat on the other. Then its nerve snapped, and the rat bolted off to one side. Both cat and dog hesitated, caught out by the move, but the cat recovered first and was soon after it again. However, there was one

thing that the rat hadn't bargained on, and that was that the cat was no longer in between it and the students, and Deanna Tyler now had a clear shot at him. Deanna didn't miss clear shots often.

"Incarcero!" The hex unfurled into a golden cage that struck the rat dead on, wrapping around it, rolling the rat over and over until it came to a halt, with the rat well tangled in its golden skeins. The cat came to a halt by the rat, meowing loudly and prancing around as if it was down to its magic that the rat had been captured.

"Scabbers!" Ron and Harry had arrived just in time to see Deanna's hex capture the rat, and Ron was reacting as one would expect. Before Harry could restrain him, Ron had broken free and run to Scabbers' side, trying to free him, without success.

"Ron, wait," Harry gasped, catching up with him. "Don't let him out! Not yet. He'll be alright, just let Deanna sort it."

Ron wasn't listening. "Scabbers!" he cried out, before noticing the cat sitting across from him, looking rather nervous. Roaring, he grabbed his wand and lunged for the cat, which darted away with all the speed it could manage. Ignoring Deanna's shout and Hermione's scream, ignoring everything except the red mist which had descended, Ron raised his wand and starting to cry out a hex... at least until several kilograms of dog cannoned into him, knocking him to the floor mid-spell and growling furiously into the boy's face. Ron whimpered, all thoughts of vengeance forgotten in the face of the savage beast pinning him to the floor. The cat, taking advantage of the distraction, had scrambled over to where Hermione was waiting to scoop her up in her arms and fuss over her.

It was Harry who approached the dog, completely without fear, stroking its back.

"It's alright," he whispered. "He's caught, Deanna's got him trapped. And she's fine, Hermione's looking after her. You can let him go. Look. It's alright."

The dog calmed down, stepping away from Ron and following Harry, looking over to where Deanna had surrounded the rat with yet more protective charms and had levitated it next to her shoulder, and where Hermione was cradling the cat in her arms. Shaking, Ron got to his feet, staring at Harry.

"What the bloody hell is happening, mate?" he whispered. "What's got into you? And Tyler? And why can't I have my rat back?"

Harry scratched the dog's head, looking at Deanna. "I did promise him answers."

"Answers?" Hermione was looking from Harry to Deanna, frowning. For the first time, she seemed to notice the dog, and the fact that Deanna had cast an awful lot of protective charms just to keep hold of someone's pet rat. "Harry? What's happening? And whose dog is that?"

Deanna sighed. "Come on. Come with me and I'll explain everything. It's time you two knew anyway." With the rat hovering in front of her, she led the way to the Whomping Willow. The dog fell in behind her at once, trotting along at her side. Hermione exchanged glances with the two boys, before the cat made her mind up for her, leaping out of her arms and running to join the dog, which let out a happy bark as it noticed her arriving. Not wanting to leave her cat, Hermione ran to join Deanna.

Harry turned to Ron. "Well?"

"Do I even get a choice?" Ron said, scowling.

"Not if you want to know what's going on," said Harry.

"Bloody hell. Alright then," Ron sighed. Harry grinned, and the two of them ran to catch up with Deanna.

Looking back, Hermione reflected, she should probably have realised something was up with her pet a lot sooner than she had done. After all, a cat that had mysteriously attached itself to her and was far too well looked after to be a stray but had no apparent owner was surely suspicious. But loneliness had blinded her and she'd steadfastly ignored the obvious. However, when Deanna had looked at the cat and simply said "Well?" and the cat had proceeded to dive under the Whomping Willow's branches, press a particular knob on one of the roots, and open up a passageway that led underneath the tree, Hermione could allow herself to be blinded no more.

"Cleo?" she whispered, feeling her heart sink. No normal cat was that intelligent, and no cat was that trainable. She'd always known Cleo was smart... but some serious magic would need to be involved to make a cat that smart. Deanna heard her, and squeezed her shoulder, sadness in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," she said softly. "I only found out today myself, but... your cat's not what she seems."

Hermione nodded, biting her lip and feeling a cold, hollow feeling in her chest. She'd always known in the back of her mind that Cleo wasn't really hers... but to suddenly realise it had hit her hard.

"What is she, Deanna?" Hermione asked. "Is she... I mean, she's not evil or dangerous, is she?"

Deanna did laugh at that. "No, no, of course not. By and large, she's fairly harmless. You were never in any danger from her. Come on, let's go inside. I'll tell you everything there."

Hermione looked up to where the cat was standing by the hole, staring mournfully at her as if it understood what she was feeling. Hermione narrowed her eyes. It seemed to understand a bit too well. The cat, seemingly unable to meet her gaze, turned and dived down the hole. Deanna, still levitating the rat, followed. Hermione turned to look at Harry, who was watching her sadly.

"You know too, don't you?" she said. Harry nodded.

"I got told it all this afternoon," he replied. "It's... pretty unbelievable really. But you got off lightly really, compared to..." He stopped, looking at Ron.

"Compared to what, Harry?" Ron snapped. "Compared to me?"

Harry didn't answer. He didn't really need to. He hung his head, shuffling his feet.

"Great," Ron scowled. "I'm right about that bloody cat, but there's something wrong with Scabbers too?"

"Pretty much," Harry admitted. "But come with me. Deanna's going to explain it all."

Ron didn't answer. Glaring, he turned away and made his way into the passageway, the dog wasting no time in following him in with only a backward glance at Harry.

Harry held out his hand to Hermione. "Coming?"

Hermione nodded and followed him in.

At length, all four children and two animals were sitting in a circle in the Shrieking Shack, with the imprisoned rat in the centre.

"Where is this?" Hermione asked, looking about her. It was an odd mix of spotlessly clean and falling apart. There was no furnishing at all and the room was a small, windowless wooden one of uncertain age, but there was no dust or cobwebs anywhere. It was as if someone had swept the room with charms designed to completely scrub it clean. Of course, that was because not half an hour ago, Sirius had been doing just that, but Hermione wasn't to know that.

"We're inside the Shrieking Shack," said Deanna.

"The Shrieking Shack?" said Ron and Hermione in unison, glancing about in identical expressions of alarm. Ron instinctively shifted nearer Hermione as if seeking protection. Hermione was looking around, frowning.

"Isn't it meant to be haunted?"

"Meant to be," Deanna replied. "But it's not. Tell you why later. But first, I expect you want to know what the hell is going on with your pets, right?"

"Yeah," said Ron. "Why have you got Scabbers shut up in that cage? And why does that cat keep trying to kill him?" He glanced nervously at the dog, who had started glaring at Ron as he'd said that last sentence.

Hermione was staring at Deanna, seeking answers from her.

"What is she, Deanna?" she said softly. "What is Cleo? Is she even a cat really?"

"Oh she's a cat all right," said Deanna, stroking the cat behind the ears. "But not just a cat. As Harry and I discovered this afternoon, these animals, all three of them, aren't what they seem. Every single one of them, rat, cat and dog, is an illegal Animagus."

Hermione gasped, staring at the cat, horrified. She didn't want to believe it, and yet it made sense. Impeccably well-groomed, no owner, only turned up when she wanted to - of course. The human within had classes to go to, or a job, family and friends who would notice if she disappeared. And of course the human had somewhere to go, they weren't living rough like a stray would be. And obviously no one would recognise the animal or claim it as theirs. Everything just fell into place, and Hermione could only stare at the animal, sickened by its very presence.

Ron meanwhile was staring at Deanna, shaking. "No," he shouted. "No, it's not true, Scabbers isn't an Animagus, he can't be! He's been in our family for years! We'd know by now, surely?"

"Not if he never transformed, never used his magic," Deanna returned. "Come on, Ron, you always did wonder why he never showed any trace of magical power. He had to hide it or you might suspect him. He had to stay in hiding, transformed for all that time. Ever wondered just how he lived so long? Twelve years is a long time for a rat to live, isn't it?"

Ron shook his head, going pale. "No... it's not, he's not, it's not true! It's not true!" His face had gone scarlet, and he wasn't even bothering to hide the tears rolling down his cheeks. "Scabbers isn't an Animagus!"

"He bloody well is, Ron!" Marlie Lovegood's voice echoed around the room. She'd transformed back into her human form while Ron was distracted. "I knew it as soon as I laid eyes on him. We can sense other Animagi when we're transformed. I didn't know exactly who he was, but I knew what he was."

"You!" Hermione cried, shock giving way to fury. "You... you were my cat all along?"

Marlie looked away guiltily. "Um. Yeah. Sorry."

"Sorry??" Hermione shrieked. "You infiltrated our common room, blatantly lied to my face by encouraging me to keep the cat when you knew full well what it really was, you've been sitting there *listening* to all my secrets, which I didn't want anyone else to know-"

"I didn't tell anyone else!" Marlie protested. "And for what it's worth, I agree with you, Ron was being a complete arse."

"That's *not* the point!" Hermione by this time had her wand out, gesturing wildly, heedless of the dog slowly getting up, hackles rising. Deanna discreetly slipped an arm around it, trying to encourage it to sit down.

"And what's more," Hermione shouted, "you've ruined things between me and Ron by hunting Scabbers all year-"

"She hasn't ruined things," said Ron softly, although he too was glaring furiously at Marlie. Hermione was too wound up to notice.

"And I can't even work out why!" Hermione screamed. "Why, Marlie? Why'd you do it? Did you enjoy it, is that it? Did you get a kick out of spying on us? Out of using me? Did you want Ron and I to stop speaking? Fred not enough for you, you had to go for his little brother as well?"

Both Marlie and Ron went pink at that. The dog barked furiously.

"What- no! God, no!" Marlie grimaced. "Ew, god, no, me and Ron Weasley? God, no, never, I'm revolted by the very thought."

The dog settled down again, seemingly quite happy to the point where it actually looked like it was grinning.

"Could say the same about you!" Ron retorted. He moved over to where Hermione was now sobbing and pulled her into a hug. "S'alright, Hermione. It's alright. I'm here." He looked up to where Marlie was now looking rather guiltily at anywhere but the sobbing Gryffindor. "You still haven't told us why, though. What the hell were you thinking, Lovegood?"

"I'm sorry," said Marlie softly. "Ron, Hermione, I'm really sorry. But I didn't have a choice. Not once I knew who your rat really was."

"He's my rat," said Ron. "Does anything else matter?"

"Well, yes Ron, it does," said Deanna, deciding it was about time to get things back on track. "He's not *your* rat, Ron; he never really has been. He's a fugitive Death Eater by the name of Peter Pettigrew."

"What??" gasped Ron. Hermione looked up, her tears having abruptly ceased.

"But Peter Pettigrew's dead; Sirius Black killed him!" she frowned. "He went after Sirius trying to get revenge for Lily and James dying, and got himself killed. How can he be a Death Eater? Unless... unless it was

the other way around, and it was Pettigrew working for You-Know-Who, and Sirius went after him for revenge... oh!" Hermione's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh. Oh, that really does put a different light on it, doesn't it?"

"But how can he still be alive?" Ron demanded. "Black marmalised the poor bas-" he caught Hermione's eyes and stopped. "Er - the poor bloke. I mean, they never found anything bigger than his finger."

"Only his finger - of course!" Hermione cried. "They never found an entire body, that's how he did it! He caused the explosion, not Sirius! He blew up the street, cut off his own finger so there'd be something to find, transformed and ran away in the chaos! Which means Sirius is... innocent. Oh my god." She noticed Marlie, Deanna and Harry grinning at her. "You three knew all along, didn't you?"

"We all found out this afternoon," said Harry. "Well, Deanna and me anyway; Marls has known for months."

"Now you know why I had to keep pretending," said Marlie. "It started out as a bit of fun, I admit, but once I found out about Sirius and Pettigrew, things got ser- no, I'm not even going there, that's a bloody awful pun - things got *intense* and I had to keep doing it. I couldn't let a Death Eater go free. I just couldn't."

"I know," said Hermione, and her voice contained none of the anger of earlier. "I understand. I still don't think it was right... but I do get why you did it."

"Thanks," said Marlie quietly. "I appreciate it."

"So if Sirius is innocent, where is he?" Ron asked. "And how the hell did Lovegood find out all this?"

"Easy, that's cause I told her," a man's voice rasped out. "And may I offer my congratulations to young Miss, er, Hermione, wasn't it? Hermione, for showing more brains than the entire Auror division put

together and working it all out so quickly. Well done, kid. I think I like you."

Sirius Black had transformed back into human form and was currently spread out on the floor, all six foot three of him, resting his head on one of his hands. He grinned at Hermione.

"Sirius Black, at your service."

"Oh!" Hermione gasped. She was lost for words, and to be honest, it was hard to blame her. The sight of Sirius Black lounging on the floor in black leather trousers, white vest, long black coat, biker boots and very little else tended to do that to people. Nevertheless, Hermione was a well-brought up young lady and had enough self-possession to remember her manners.

"Hermione Granger, at yours. You - you were the dog?"

Sirius nodded. "That's right. It's how I've been avoiding capture all this time. Well, that and a little help from the kitten here." He patted Marlie on the leg, smiling at her. Marlie went rather pink.

"You're the bane of my existence, Padfoot," she told him, although the effect she was looking for was a little ruined by her then stroking his hair and draping an arm around his shoulders. Sirius grinned and rested his head on her thigh.

"Well, now we know the real reason she went off Fred," Ron commented with a grin.

"Ron!" Hermione hissed.

"It's not like that!" Marlie protested, but unfortunately for her, no one seemed to be buying it. Deanna and Ron shared identical grins, Hermione was looking vaguely disapproving although her heart didn't really seem to be in it, and Harry's face wasn't giving an awful lot away - nevertheless, he did seem to be smiling slightly.

"Whatever, Lovegood," Ron grinned. "Whatever." He turned his attention back to Sirius. "So you're really Sirius Black then?"

"The one and only," Sirius grinned. "You're Ron Weasley, right? You look just like your dad. Didn't know him that well, but he always seemed like a nice bloke."

"He is," said Ron, slightly embarrassed. "Tell you what, you don't look a thing like your Wanted poster."

"I was wondering that too," Hermione agreed. "You look completely insane in your Wanted poster, and now you're looking quite nice. Not in that way!" she hastily added, as Harry and Deanna both suppressed laughter and Sirius didn't even bother trying.

"It's alright, Hermione," he said calmly. "It's not your fault. You can't help it. It's me, I just have this effect on people - ow!" Marlie had given him a clip round the ear.

"Stop flirting!" she snapped. "And stop doing that as well." Sirius was pouting at her, and on someone who didn't know him as well as Marlie, it might have worked too. However, someone who didn't know Marlie as well as Sirius did might also have thought that the way she was glaring at him meant she hated him. Sirius squeezed Marlie's hand.

"To answer your question, Ron, I ran into this one. First thing she did was sort me out with a bath and a make-over. She's fussy like that."

Everyone laughed at that. Even Marlie couldn't help but grin.

"Can you blame me? You smelt revolting."

"You say the nicest things sometimes," said Sirius, rolling his eyes.

"And you really escaped from Azkaban, went on the run and haven't been caught for nearly a year?" Ron seemed fascinated.

"I'm here, aren't I?" said Sirius.

"Wow," Ron breathed, a starstruck look on his face that told the world that he now had a new hero. "That's bloody brilliant!"

"Not wanting to disturb anyone or anything," said Harry, clearing his throat, "but we've still got an Animagus Death Eater here." He prodded Pettigrew's cage with his wand, watching in satisfaction as sparks flew and the rat squeaked. "Does anyone know what we're going to do with him now?"

"A question I'd also be quite interested in hearing the answer to," another man commented. Everyone went still, heads turning slowly to the trapdoor, despite already knowing who'd arrived without needing to look. All apart from Sirius, who'd sat up immediately, shrugging Marlie off him, panic and hope warring in his eyes.

Remus Lupin emerged into the room, wand drawn, cursorily glancing around the room at the others. His eyes lingered for a second on the caged rat on the floor, but it was on Sirius where they fell last, and stayed.

"Moony," Sirius whispered, the colour having gone from his cheeks. If Lupin had been transfixed by Sirius, Sirius only seemed to have eyes for Lupin in turn. Not even Luella Martin materialising next to Deanna served to distract either of them.

"It's alright," she announced. "I told him everything. He's on our side. He's got the map too; it's how we knew where to find you."

Four Hogwarts students immediately relaxed... but the fifth was still watching the two men, seeing probably an awful lot more than either of them would really want her to know, and beginning to wonder if perhaps, as close as they'd become over the last few months, Sirius hadn't told her quite everything about his past.

"Is it true?" Lupin asked.

Sirius's eyes travelled over to the rat-cage on the floor. Lupin's eyes were quick to follow. Both men stared at it, before looking at each other once more.

"It's true," said Sirius. Lupin breathed deeply, his hand going limp and his wand clattering to the floor, where it rolled away unnoticed by anyone and was only halted by the magic caging Pettigrew.

"Padfoot," Lupin whispered. Marlie caught the look in his eyes and felt something break inside as Sirius sprung to his feet, and without seeming to move, had covered the distance between them and taken Lupin in his arms. In itself, that wouldn't have been anything to worry about - Sirius was physically affectionate by nature, after all. Lupin, however, was not, and yet there he was clinging on to Sirius, eyes tight shut and pain and bliss consuming him by turn.

Sirius wouldn't... he doesn't... surely not? He'd have said if he'd dated Lupin in the past... wouldn't he?

Not if he was trying to flirt with you, he wouldn't... Marlie looked away, wishing she could shut her ears.

"Padfoot, god, I'm so sorry," she heard Lupin saying. "All those years, and I just left you in Azkaban, believed you were guilty, never did a thing to help..."

"Don't, Moony," came the gruff reply. "Don't, you weren't to know he'd turned, no more than any of us. It's not your fault, I left you first after all, only reason I never came to you after finding the castle like that was because I didn't think you'd ever want to see me again..."

"I didn't," Lupin's voice was muffled, whether because he was talking into Sirius's chest or for some other reason, Marlie didn't want to think. "Didn't then... but I know now, know about you and Caitlin, know why you did it, still think you're a complete arse, but at least I understand why now."

"And now?" Sirius asked. "Do you still want to talk to me now?"

"Yes," Lupin breathed. "God, yes." If Marlie had been able to look, she'd have seen Lupin reach out and touch Sirius's cheek, leaning in with parted lips and Sirius closing his eyes and going very still... before raising his hands and stepping back, shaking his head slowly and turning to look at Marlie.

"Kitten," she heard him whisper, and then he was kneeling next to her, an arm around her shoulder. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," she whispered, smiling brightly and hoping the hollowness inside wasn't showing. "Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?"

Sirius didn't reply. He gave her a tight little smile and turned to look at Lupin who, Marlie noticed, was watching them both with the same sort of not-quite-genuine almost-smile.

"I see," was all Lupin said. "Well, can't fault your taste there, Padfoot." He turned his attention to the others, who had all been watching with varying degrees of surprise and incomprehension. Deanna and Luella looked at each other knowingly, while Ron was whispering to Hermione, Harry having moved closer to listen in.

"What was that all about?" Ron hissed.

"I'll, er, I'll tell you later," Hermione whispered back.

"Is it me or was Professor Lupin acting a bit like an ex-girlfriend of Sirius's?" Harry whispered. Ron's face wrinkled in confusion.

"But... he's a bloke, blokes don't go out with other blokes, do they?"

Harry didn't say a word; he was remembering Uncle Vernon watching the TV and complaining about 'effeminate long-haired poofs - isn't natural!' He wasn't sure what he'd meant at the time, but he was beginning to have an idea. He wasn't sure how he felt about the idea of his godfather snogging men, but if Uncle Vernon disapproved, it probably wasn't all that bad.

"Ron, Harry, I promise I will explain everything later, but in the mean time, will you both shut up?" Hermione hissed, going bright red. "Professor Lupin's talking."

"So, shall we get Wormtail out then?" said Lupin brightly. "See what he's got to say for himself?"

"Go on then," said Sirius, seizing on the distraction. "Deanna, do the honours."

Deanna undid the protection charms holding Pettigrew at the exact same moment Lupin realised he didn't have his wand.

"Wait, where - Deanna, no!" Lupin cried. The charms died as he spoke and several things happened at once. Pettigrew seized on the abandoned wand, transforming as he did so, rolled out of the way of the curses that Sirius, Marlie and Deanna all fired at once, achieving nothing other than causing a small explosion in the floor. Wood particles flew everywhere, and everyone dived for cover, the three Gryffindor students huddled together, Lupin falling half on top of Marlie while Sirius had shielded Deanna and Luella.

Marlie had barely had time to move before she heard Lupin cry out and go rolling away. She tried to sit up, then shrieked as someone grabbed her hair and yanked her head back, wand tip at her throat. Her own wand had slipped out of her hand and was lying well out of reach now thanks to the sloping floor, and Lupin, wandless, could do nothing.

"Put them away," Wormtail snarled at where Sirius and Deanna were advancing with their wands drawn. "Do a thing to me and I'll hurt your pretty little friend here. Maybe make her not so pretty any more, eh?" He gestured with the wand, slicing into Marlie just below her collarbone. Marlie howled, tears prickling at her eyes, trying to ignore the steady drip of liquid onto the floor that hadn't been there a moment ago.

"I will kill you, Wormtail," Sirius growled, and Marlie had never heard him like that before, never so furious. He'd gone pale and his eyes looked almost black. "I will kill you myself, rip the flesh from your bones,

peel your very skin off and leave you strung out for the Thestrals, I swear it, Wormtail!"

"I wouldn't," Wormtail replied carelessly. "Or they'll be too full from your girlfriend to bother." Another hex and now it was Marlie's thigh sliced open and bleeding. Lupin was clenching his fists, looking furious with himself, while Deanna had laid a restraining hand on Sirius's arm.

"Sirius, let it go," Marlie gasped. "Don't do anything else!"

"Smart kid, this," Wormtail grinned, kicking the trapdoor open as he backed over to it, Marlie still held against him. "But then, pain always was a pretty good teacher. Pity you didn't learn anything from it in Azkaban, Padfoot."

He half turned to head down the stairs, Marlie dangling over the entrance, but he was still looking at Sirius and Lupin.

"Well, nice as this little reunion was, I'm afraid I'll have to leave you all. Nice seeing you again, fellas," Wormtail said sweetly.

"Professor, *help me!*" Marlie screamed.

"Stop your crying, girl," Wormtail snarled, opening up a nasty gash in her side. "Lupin can't help you, he hasn't even got a wand."

Those were the last words he spoke before another curse exploded into the hut. It hit Wormtail in the side, sending him sprawling unconscious to the floor. Marlie slipped out of his grasp and sunk to the floor, curling up into a ball. Hermione, Ron and Harry were at her side in seconds, as was a large black dog that was whining as it nudged the stricken girl

"Do something, Hermione!" Harry cried.

"I can't!" Hermione sobbed. "These are magical wounds! I don't even know what caused them! It'd take a fully trained Healer to deal with these."

"Then, Miss Granger," a dark voice told her, "I suggest you stand aside and let one get to work."

Chapter Thirty Two

The End of All Hope

"Professor Snape?" Hermione gasped, backing off as her Potions teacher approached. "What are you doing here?"

"Six students out of bounds, two of whom are prefects, one of whom's grievously injured, along with their Defence teacher, a stray dog and a man who's meant to be dead apprehended in the act of apparently abducting one of them and you're asking what I'm doing here?" Snape raised an eyebrow. "Miss Granger, it's not me who needs to account for their presence."

"It's lucky you came when you did," said Lupin, coming to kneel next to him. "I don't know what we would have done otherwise. How did you find us?"

"As to that," Snape replied, "I had the foresight to place a tracker charm on you during your first transformation. A necessary precaution, in case you got out and disappeared. Lupin," he raised a finger, cutting off the other man's outraged protests, "your objections regarding the ethics of such an action have been woefully negated by present circumstances, which to my mind have proved precisely why it was necessary in the first place. Here. I brought you this. You neglected to collect it from me earlier. Drink it." He handed Lupin a still smoking goblet.

"Oh," said Lupin sheepishly. "That. I'd forgotten." He promptly downed the contents, unable to suppress a revolted shiver.

"Forgotten," Snape muttered, turning his attention back to Marlie. "Honestly, that one potion makes the difference between normality and him turning into a raging monster, and he forgets about it? What Albus was thinking, I'll never know..." He began examining Marlie's wounds, scanning them with his wand.

"Hang on... transformations... raging monster... and that potion smelt of aconite..." Hermione leapt to her feet in triumph. "You're a werewolf! I knew it!"

"Werewolf? Him? What, really?" said Ron. He looked Lupin over, clearly not convinced. "Blimey. He doesn't look the type."

"Not all of us look like Fenrir Greyback, you know," said Lupin. "Apart from the Full Moon nights, I'm perfectly civilised."

"Arguable," Snape murmured. He caught Marlie's eye and they both shared a grin; at least until Marlie winced from the pain.

"Oh god," she whimpered. "It hurts, Professor..."

"You're going to be fine," Snape told her. "They're surface wounds, not deep, you've lost blood so you're going to feel weak and dizzy for a bit, but you're going to live. I just need to seal the wounds for you - you're fortunate no truly Dark spells were used. It could have been worse." With a few waves of his wand, the wounds closed as if they were never there. Still wincing, Marlie tried to sit up. Snape moved to assist her.

"Careful. You've lost a lot of blood. You're still weak. Don't try to do too much. You should try and take it easy." Snape wasn't terribly optimistic about this happening, but nevertheless he had to at least try and make sure it did.

"Thanks," Marlie whispered. The dog promptly let out a happy bark and proceeded to prance around her, before nuzzling her face and licking her.

"Eww!" Marlie grimaced. "Get off! What have I told you about licking me?"

The dog, apparently unrepentant, just barked again before rolling over and resting its head in her lap.

"Who let that animal in?" Snape asked, folding his arms.

"He's mine," said Lupin quickly. "I couldn't keep him at school due to health and safety regulations, but I take him out here all the time. Marlie encountered him earlier this year; they've bonded surprisingly well."

"I wasn't talking about the dog," Snape growled. He indicated Peter Pettigrew who, despite still being unconscious, had been bound up in as many imprisonment charms as Deanna and Luella knew how to cast. "Pettigrew is supposed to have died years ago. What, I might ask, is he doing here?"

Seven people all began to talk at once. Severus put his hands to his ears.

"Quiet!!!" he roared. The chatter subsided.

"Lupin," said Snape softly. "In as few words as possible, explain to me why Peter Pettigrew has come back from the dead."

"Simple," Lupin replied. "It turns out he never died in the first place. Sirius didn't kill him, although I'm sure he very much wanted to."

"Didn't kill - impossible!" Snape snarled. "If he wasn't dead, where's he been for the last twelve years? Invisible? In a coma?"

"As a rat."

As one, the entire room turned to look at Hermione.

"He's a rat Animagus," she explained. "He faked his own death, killing twelve Muggles in the process, and ran away before Sirius could hex him. He got adopted by the Weasleys, who didn't know what he really was, and kept by them as a pet. That's why Sirius was really trying to break into Gryffindor, he wasn't after Harry at all, he wanted to get his hands on Ron's pet rat."

"I see," Snape purred, advancing on the girl. Ron and Harry both drew their wands and moved closer to protect her. "And you worked this out all by yourself, did you?"

"Of course she didn't," said Marlie. "I told her."

Snape spun round, eyes nearly popping out of his head. "You??" He began to massage his temples, feeling a migraine coming on.

"I fear I'm going to regret asking this - Miss Lovegood, how did you discover Mr Weasley's rat was an Animagus?"

"Transformed Animagi can sense other Animagi, sir," said Marlie. "I knew what he was immediately, I just didn't know who. I've been after him all year, and today we finally caught him. Except it went a bit ti- er, I mean it went a bit wrong and he'd taken me hostage and was trying to escape when you turned up."

"You - Animagi - not possible!" Snape cried. "Miss Lovegood, it takes *years* of study and prodigious magical talent to achieve that; intelligent as you are, you are surely not capable - oh dear god."

A white long-haired cat was sitting before him, looking as smug as it was possible for any feline to look. A second later, and Marlie was there once more.

"Draco gave me some books of his mother's," Marlie grinned. "I must thank him, they were really useful."

Snape had gone ashen. "Not possible," he kept whispering to himself. "Not possible!" Wheeling around, he stalked over to where Pettigrew was lying, motioned for Deanna and Luella to move out of the way and raised his wand.

"Revelo Morsmordre!"

Sure enough, a ghostly silver Dark Mark rose from the unconscious man, hovering for a few seconds before disappearing.

"No," Snape whispered. "No, it can't be, it can't! It can't have been Pettigrew, it *cannot be!!*" He raised his wand, face twisted into a mask of fury and hate. "*Avada Ke-*"

"No!" Several people, including Lupin, Marlie and Hermione, cried out, but it was Harry who physically pounced on Snape and knocked him to the floor.

"You can't kill him; I won't let you!" Harry shouted. Snape tried to fight the boy off, but Harry, persistent as ever, refused to let go.

"Fifty - points from - Gryffindor for - blatant insubordination and assaulting - a member of staff!" Snape shouted. Finally he managed to get hold of Harry's wrists and hold him off. "For gods' sake, boy, have you taken leave of your senses? The man was responsible for the death of your parents!"

"I know!" said Harry, gritting his teeth. "But I don't want him to die!"

"Whyever not?" Snape demanded.

"Because otherwise he'll never get justice done," said Harry quietly. "We should call the Aurors, let them sort it out."

"Well said, Harry." Sirius transformed back into human form and sauntered over, laying a hand on Harry's shoulder. "I was all for torturing him to death myself, but having him spend the rest of his life around Dementors works too."

Snape had gone very still. As Sirius and Lupin together pulled Harry away, he got to his feet and pulled out his wand.

"You," he whispered. "YOU!"

"Hello, Snivellus," Sirius smirked. "Been a while, hasn't it?"

Snape's face flushed scarlet.

"Don't call me that!" he hissed.

"What you gonna do, hex me?" Sirius sneered. "Oh wait, that's right, I'm innocent, you can't now, can you?"

"Give me a reason, Black," Snape whispered. "Give me one reason, and I swear I will!"

"You won't," said Sirius, apparently confident in his ability to remain unharmed. "You haven't got the-"

"Padfoot!" To everyone's surprise, it was Lupin who had spoken. He was standing next to Snape, one hand on Snape's wand arm but his eyes glaring at Sirius. "Sirius, *stop it*. I mean it. Leave Severus alone."

Sirius stared at Lupin, not used to having him, of all people, interfere with the Snape-bashing. "I - but, what? Moony, what are you doing?"

"Doing what I should have done at Hogwarts years ago, ending this stupid schoolboy rivalry," said Lupin sternly. "You're both grown men and look at you; you're acting like children! I will make some allowance for Severus, as he's had to process a lot in the last half hour, but you really should know better by now, Sirius."

"But, Moony, it's Sniv-" Sirius began. Lupin cut him off.

"His name, Padfoot, is *Severus*. I trust you know how to use it?"

Sirius might have argued the point, had it not been for a light touch on his shoulder.

"Leave it, Sirius," said Marlie softly. "He's not that bad. It was years ago, just let it go."

With a sigh, Sirius relented. With both Marlie and Lupin against him, it didn't seem like he had much choice.

"Fine, fine. Snape, I'm sorry."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "You're apologising? Good god, I never thought I'd see the day." He lowered his wand and slipped it into his pocket. "Accepted, if it means I finally get to see Remus demonstrating that he's got a spine."

Sirius was about to protest, when Snape winked at Lupin and turned to him with a smile. Lupin flushed, but returned the gesture.

"You're both my friend. You don't have to be that friendly with each other, but I'd like it if you could at least stop the sniping."

Both Sirius and Snape assented, albeit with a certain amount of reluctance. It wasn't ideal, but it was probably the best they were going to get.

"So, er, now what?" Deanna asked, poking Pettigrew through the charms. "What do we do with him?"

"Take him back to Hogwarts," Snape sighed. "The Headmaster will want to hear about this. Then we can call the Aurors, hand Pettigrew over and let justice take its course."

No one had any objections to that. Sirius and Lupin undid the charms on Wormtail so they could move him, and followed Snape down the passageway, with the children following behind.

"Come, we need to hurry," said Snape urgently. "We don't have much time, and Lupin needs to be in his office by moonrise - that can't be far off now."

Sirius and Lupin nodded and followed. It wasn't long before they reached the exit. Snape climbed out first, before holding out a hand to Lupin.

"You'll be alright?" Lupin asked Sirius. He nodded.

"Yeah. I'll look after this one, you climb out and then I'll levitate him up to you both."

Lupin reluctantly let go of Wormtail and climbed out. Snape for his part helped Lupin out, then turned back to Sirius, arm outstretched for all of two seconds, before a strangled cry from outside caught everyone's attention.

"What is that?" Ron asked, going pale.

"I don't know," said Hermione. "I hope it's not Dementors - I don't think it is. Sounds too human."

Harry fingered his wand. "If it is, they won't get past me," he vowed. "I'm not letting them get Sirius, not now!"

Marlie shook her head. "It isn't Dementors. It's - oh god, it's..."

"Moony!" Sirius shouted at the entrance. He could see what they could not; Snape pointing his wand and glaring. "*Moony!* Snape, get down here, you idiot, he's not safe!"

"He's perfectly safe," Snape snapped back, "it's just very inconvenient, that's all. Yes, you idiot wolf, I am talking about you. No, just stay where you are, let me deal with this."

"Snape?" Sirius called up, confused. "Why aren't you dead yet? Shouldn't he be disembowelling you about now?"

"I gave him a potion," Snape replied. "It keeps him sane during the transformation. He's a wolf, but he's got a human mind still. He'll be fine."

"You sure about that?" Sirius asked. "It's not going to stop working or anything, is it?"

This time, the reply, when it came, sounded as if Snape was barely repressing the urge to come back down and strangle Sirius.

"No, it's not going to stop working; he's had the full course, it has worked *just fine* every month since last September, I have personally supervised most of the transformations, and thus far no one has died. Now stop asking ridiculous questions and get up here!"

"Alright, alright, keep your hair on," Sirius muttered. "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" Wormtail floated out of the exit, Snape catching him and

laying him on the ground, before turning and extending a hand towards Sirius.

Sirius stared at the hand, before looking up at its owner warily. Snape raised an eyebrow as if to say "come on!" Taking a deep breath, Sirius took Snape's hand in his and let Snape help him out. When absolutely nothing out of the ordinary happened and Sirius found himself sitting on the grass next to a barely conscious Wormtail and a werewolf that promptly wandered over and nuzzled him, he almost felt rather disappointed. *Snape... being helpful and nearly civil. To me. Never would have seen that one coming.*

Marlie was next to emerge, still a little shaky on her feet despite Sirius and Snape both helping her out. Next were the three Gryffindors, with Deanna and Luella bringing up the rear.

"That everyone?" Sirius asked, doing a quick headcount. Marlie nodded.

"I think so. Can we get going, it's really bloody cold out here?"

"Isn't it just?" Hermione shivered. "Professor, is it normally this cold at this time of year?"

"It is early spring in Scotland," Deanna pointed out. "And it's really misty too, especially over the lake, look."

Sirius felt his spine start to prickle, at the same time as Lupin started to growl, and Snape said softly, "Too cold." Slowly, Sirius turned around, to see the mist moving far too rapidly up from the lake.

"That's *not mist*," said Luella urgently, at the same time as Marlie cried "Dementors!" and Snape shouted at everyone to get back, to run while he held them off.

"No," said Sirius, grabbing the other man's arm. "No, it's me they want. You go, get the others to safety. Get Dumbledore."

"I think not," said Snape, trying to shake Sirius off. "Black, don't be an imbecile, transform, get to safety, you're not guilty!"

"Sirius, come on!" Marlie cried, clutching at his coat. Harry joined her.

"We're not going without you!" Harry shouted. "I'll stand and fight; I know the Patronus Charm!"

"So do I!" Deanna announced. "I'm staying. Lu, can you get those two to safety?"

Luella nodded and tried to drag Hermione and Ron away, not entirely successfully.

"No, I wanna stay!" Ron cried. "We've got to help Harry and Sirius!"

"Ron, you and Hermione don't know the first thing about Dementor repelling!" said Luella. "Come on, we have to get help, you heard Sirius."

"She's right," said Hermione. "Come on, Ron, let's go!" Grabbing Ron, she and Luella fled. Harry, Deanna and Marlie, however, stayed put. Snape threw up his hands in despair.

"I blame you for this, Black," he snarled, whirling around, wand at the ready to repel the first wave of Dementors. "*Expecto Patronum!*" A silver doe leapt out of his wand, successfully dissuading the nearest Dementor.

"My fault?" Sirius shouted. "How is it my fault?" He dodged out of the way of Deanna's falcon Patronus.

"You've turned two of my Slytherins into exemplar demonstrations of Gryffindor values!" said Snape, sending the doe out on another run.

"I can't help it if I'm an inspiration," Sirius countered. "And if I may say so, Snape, that's the girliest bloody Patronus I've ever seen."

"My Patronus is NOT girly!" Snape shouted. He shook himself, getting himself back under control with an effort, and changed the subject. "You've turned Miss Lovegood, of all people, into someone willing to recklessly endanger her life for other people! She was never like this before!"

"Actually, that's not true," said Harry. "Last year she ran off into the school while there was a Muggle-born hunting Basilisk around because she knew Hermione was in there. *Expecto Patronum!*" The stag Patronus that resulted made a valiant effort, but dissipated as six Dementors closed in on it at once. Deanna's silver falcon was similarly being torn apart.

"There's too many of them," said Deanna, her voice losing all emotion. "We'll never manage it."

"We'll manage it," said Snape. He called the doe back to him, and with a flick sent it running off towards the castle. "Albus will come for us. He'll save us and then all will be well. We still have Wormtail, after all."

Snape's timing could not have been worse. As the Dementors got nearer, Wormtail looked up, went pale and immediately shifted into a rat, taking off across the grass, making for the safety of the trees.

"No!" Marlie cried, torn between the urge to shift and chase after him, and the equally strong urge not to abandon Sirius. She looked back at Sirius, tears in her eyes. *Sirius, I'm so sorry, we were so close...*

Sirius caught her eye, and she could see pain in his eyes too, but not anger, never anger, just understanding and that hurt even more. Then the decision was taken out of her hands. Lupin had seen what was going on, and taken off himself, bounding after the rat.

"Go Moony!" Sirius whispered, eyes alive. He had no idea if Moony would succeed where Marlie had failed, but he could only hope.

Hope however seemed in short supply for everyone else. Deanna had already fallen, lying on the ground and giving in to her demons. Harry

too was succumbing, with only Marlie stopping him from collapsing entirely. Snape was trying to rouse Deanna with one hand and cast a Patronus with the other, but with the doe gone on a mercy errand and Dementors closing in, he was having a hard time of it. Sirius turned and looked at Marlie, the only one there remotely emotionally capable of helping... and the only one there not capable of the Patronus Charm.

She was staring at him, eyes bleak as she held Harry.

"I'm so sorry, Sirius," she whispered. "We were so close, weren't we?"

"Don't say that," said Sirius, going to her and sitting next to her, putting an arm around her and the unconscious Harry. "You gave it your best shot; we all did."

"Wasn't enough," Marlie whispered. "Wasn't enough, and now we're all going to die."

"We're not going to-" Sirius stopped, feeling everything go very still and very cold. Slowly he turned around. The Dementors had caught up with them and had them surrounded. He exchanged a glance with Snape, who was holding Deanna in his arms. This really was it. They were done for, it seemed. Sirius wasn't really afraid of dying himself; he'd had years to accustom himself to the idea after all. But Harry, Deanna, Marls, even Snape, they didn't deserve to die. Not like this.

One of the Dementors had broken off from the rest and was approaching him. Sirius raised his wand, determined to fight to the last.

"*Expec- Expecto...*" It was no good. A happy memory wouldn't come, just the thoughts chasing each other around his head: *we failed, we were so close, but he got away, you let him get away, you're innocent but it doesn't matter, you're still going to die, you're all going to die, you and Harry and Deanna and Snape and Marlie, you're all going to die and it's all your fault, they're innocent, you brought this on them, you've killed the woman you love and your two children, you deserve this, you deserve to die.* Sirius lowered his wand, emotion dying out of him as he

stared up into the Dementor's face, watching as it lowered its hood, preparing to administer the Kiss...

"No!" Marlie cried, dropping Harry and crawling to Sirius. Grabbing his head, she turned him forcibly to face her.

"It's over, Marls," he whispered, his voice dead. "Just let me go. It's time."

"No!" Marlie shouted, tears rolling down her face. "I'm not letting you go! I'm not going to let you die! I can't let you, won't let you, Sirius, I love you!"

"I... what?" He'd imagined that, surely?

"I love you!" Marlie whispered, and hope was fading from her own eyes, but she didn't care anymore. If all was lost, what was there to lose? Flinging her arms around Sirius, she pulled him to her and kissed him for all she was worth. Sirius went still, before his body realised what his mind was still trying to process and he found himself kissing her back. *I love you too, little kitten.*

He broke apart, staring at her, watching her looking up at him, knowing for the first time that she felt the same way he did, that he did actually have a hope in hell with her, and that when he was free and she was of age and out of school, they had as good as chance as anyone of making it. Despite Dementors and imminent death breathing down the back of his neck, quite literally, he found himself not only daring to hope again, but beseiged with an awful lot of happy thoughts, not to mention the overwhelming desire to live. Grinning at Marlie, he pointed his wand at the Dementor looming over him.

"*EXPECTO PATRONUM!!!!*" he roared. The gigantic, glowing figure of a silver Persian cat burst from it, tearing into the Dementor, literally ripping it apart. The Dementor howled as it imploded, grey mist exploding out of its robes, which collapsed in a heap on the floor. The rest of the Dementors immediately fell back, no longer looking quite so confident. Nearby, Snape looked up, shaking himself back to life.

"And you had the nerve to call my Patronus girly?" he laughed, watching the cat turning on the rest of the Dementors, who were all backing away from it as hastily as they could manage. Snape brandished his own wand, summoning the doe Patronus, which joined the cat in rounding up Dementors. It wasn't long before the last of the creatures were fleeing across the lake as fast as they could go, and cat and doe returned to their casters and disappeared.

"That was one hell of a Patronus," Marlie whispered. "I've never seen one actually kill a Dementor before."

"Yeah, well, it was close range and all," said Sirius. He smiled at Marlie, stroking her hair. "That, and it had one hell of a happy thought powering it." Marlie actually blushed at this. Sirius kissed the top of her head, still grinning.

"God help me, am I going to have to spend the next six months policing the Slytherin common room and making sure Miss Lovegood's in it at night?" Snape sighed. Deanna propped herself up on one arm, rubbing her eyes.

"Oh bloody hell, they're not snogging, are they? Permission to pass out again, sir."

"You don't sound surprised," said Snape, wondering how long this had been going on for, exactly.

"Marls told me she liked him this afternoon," said Deanna. "It was only a matter of time, really."

Snape could feel the migraine threatening to return. He could only imagine what Melissa's reaction to this would be; on the other hand, at least Black wasn't the girl's teacher or her mother's ex-boyfriend, and if Black was infatuated with Marlene Lovegood, it meant he wouldn't be trying to chat up Caitlin...

Harry meanwhile was also coming to.

"What happened?" he whispered. "Where are the Dementors?"

"Gone," said Sirius, grinning. "Marls and me, we saw them off, didn't we, kitten?" He hugged her again, planting a kiss on her cheek.

"You were the one who cast that killer super-Patronus," said Marlie, snuggling up against Sirius.

"Couldn't have done it without you, kitten," said Sirius, smiling at her. Marlie giggled and began rubbing her nose against Sirius's. Harry privately wished the Dementors would come back so he didn't have to watch any more of this. One look at Snape, and Harry realised that perhaps for the first time ever, he and Snape were in total agreement on something. It wasn't that Harry minded his godfather going out with Marlie Lovegood, exactly; after all if anyone deserved to be happy, it was Sirius, but Harry really preferred not having to watch.

Snape coughed politely. "While this touching display of sentiment is, I'm sure, highly enjoyable for all concerned, I feel obliged to point out to you that Miss Martin has returned... and she's brought the Headmaster with her."

Sirius let go of Marlie at once, spinning around. He laid eyes on the approaching figure of Albus Dumbledore and went very still indeed. The older wizard swept his eyes over the scene, lingering on Sirius for a few minutes, before turning to Snape.

"Well, Severus, I received your message - I see you managed to deal with the Dementors without me. Tell me, whose was the cat Patronus? It can't possibly have been yours, Severus, not when ten minutes earlier, your more usual one had just spoken with me."

"Not mine, Headmaster. His." Snape pointed at Sirius.

"Please, sir, I can explain everything," said Sirius, slipping effortlessly back into the familiar poses he'd always used for explaining things to teachers when caught in sticky situations.

"I'm sure you can, Sirius. Severus's message, while understandably brief, was most intriguing. It said *Under attack from Dementors near Whomping Willow - Pettigrew not dead, Black innocent. Send help, not Aurors*. Had another man sent that message by any other means, I might have suspected foul play, but it's nearly impossible to fake or tamper with a Patronus, and I cannot believe that Severus of all people would claim you were innocent if he did not have a very compelling reason to believe it to be true."

"It is true, sir," said Marlie. "Peter Pettigrew's alive, we've all seen him tonight. Sirius didn't kill him."

"He was right here," Harry chimed in. "But he escaped when the Dementors arrived."

"It's true," Snape confirmed. "I'm prepared to show you tonight's memories in full if you wish."

Deanna, still spreadeagled on the ground, was staring at the sky. "Professor, that might not be necessary."

"Why not?" Snape asked. Deanna pointed upwards. Everyone turned to see where she was pointing. Obliterating the moon was the silhouette of a large birdlike creature with something in its claws; and it was flying closer. Both Dumbledore and Snape drew their wands.

"Wait!" Sirius cried. "Don't do anything; it's only Buckbeak."

Sure enough, the Hippogriff spread its wings and glided towards them, dropping its burden next to them and landing next to Sirius, who got up and went to tend to him.

"Hey Bucky," Sirius murmured, stroking his feathers. "What've you got for me there, eh?"

Dumbledore approached the bundle of cloth, wand out. Rolling it over, he gasped to see what was revealed. Unconscious, bruised, bloodied but very much alive, was the human form of Peter Pettigrew.

"Pettigrew," Snape breathed, eyes alight with an unholy gleam. "But how?"

Sirius looked towards the forest, where a transformed werewolf was trotting nonchalantly out of the trees and heading for them.

"Moony," he grinned. "Knew you'd come through for me!"

"Indeed," said Dumbledore, who was now looking positively cheerful. "Well, let us not linger out here all night. It's not that mild a night, and I am not as young as I used to be. Let us retire to my office, where there will be tea waiting for us, a warm fire, and perhaps most importantly, somewhere private where you can all tell me what exactly has been going on."

